

## ~ Prologue ~

With the evening sun setting behind him, he hurried through the narrow twisting streets, his feet sore from pounding the cobbled passageways. He stumbled slightly and silently cursed his tight fitting cassock, before quickly offering a penitent prayer. He tightened his grip on the large, leather-skinned envelope given him by his masters; his latest task.

Father Carlos Hernandez paused, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and patted the dust off his sweating brow. Temperatures were soaring this summer and lavishing Rome with a sweltering heat.

Without warning, the strident blast of a horn sounded. He looked up and saw a large US Army troop transport racing toward him; he had absently strayed onto the road. Reacting instinctively, he leaped backward onto the path. The truck glided past, inches from his nose, billowing a plume of grit in his face.

He froze, breathless, his eyes clamped shut. Only the sound of an evaporating ‘sorry Padré’ enabled him to squint an eye open. He looked to his right and saw the truck bounce on without having slowed down. It rounded a corner and disappeared from his sight. He placed a hand on his forehead and let out a controlled breath, before blessing himself. Sweat oozed from pores all over, making his garments feel uncomfortably claustrophobic.

He arrived at a five way intersection with the ‘Ponte Principe Amedeo Savioa Aosta’ off to his left. Beyond that, he looked across the Tiber toward his meeting point on the eastern side of the city. A nearby church bell tolled which was echoed moments later by several others a little further afield, letting him know he had twenty minutes to spare.

He spied a café nearby. Outside, a waiter was gathering the chairs together after a day’s trading. He decided to freshen up with an iced-water and sliced lemon before they closed up.

Sitting on a rickety wooden chair a couple of minutes later, he glanced across at a young man and woman who were arguing. Between swears, he caught snippets of the debate and, from what he could deduce, the man was begging forgiveness for an indiscretion, the details of which, Hernandez just couldn’t make out. The man shot him an icy stare before resuming his plea for clemency.

Hernandez’ gaze shifted to his glass. He watched the moisture droplets sliding gracefully down its side, touched some, and licked his fingers. He took a sip and closed his eyes to listen to the Eternal City as she began to close her own eyes for the night. His hand fell to the envelope on his lap.

Although a devout and obedient cleric and the possessor of many virtues, Hernandez struggled to control one in particular: curiosity. It had gotten the better of him on every one of his clandestine trips beyond the confines of Vatican City. It tempted him to sneak peeks into the unsealed envelopes he carried. What he had discovered hadn’t shocked him, in fact, he had expected it.

This time though, was different. The envelope that had been sandwiched between his arm and torso had been sealed, not just by a slick flick of the tongue, but secured with a thick, burgundy-coloured, wax blob with an embossed seal. He stared at it now, struggling to remember where he’d seen it before, which only served to heighten his intrigue.

Then it hit him.

He hadn’t recognised it immediately, mainly because it was usually accompanied by four, much larger and more notable symbols. He smiled and stifled a half-laugh before a frown clouded his face. He looked at it again, rubbing a finger along its circumference.

It wasn’t the most famous seal in all of Christendom; in fact, if he were to guess, he

would say that few inside even the Vatican would recognise it, let alone anybody outside. Realising the envelope couldn't be resealed if it were opened, he sighed and tossed it onto the table, glancing at the couple, still arguing, as they got up and walked away.

He shook his head and wondered what they had to be so worried about. Germany had surrendered a few days ago and fascism in Europe was as dead as Mussolini. He lifted his glass to take another sip and noticed that the envelope's seal had popped open. He stared at it for a moment. He wouldn't have classified it a miracle, but there it was: God had found a way to satiate his urges.

Unable to restrain himself, he reached forward and, glancing around, gingerly pulled the flap back. He slipped his hand in and withdrew two documents, leaving what he knew to be a falsified passport, untouched at the bottom.

The first was a letter, which he hurriedly scanned. It hadn't come as a surprise, as all the other envelopes he had couriered had included a similar introductory document. He turned his attention to the second document; four pages, held together by a staple in the top left hand corner. His eyes sifted through an itinerary, a dossier and what appeared to be a detailed set of instructions to be executed as soon as the recipient arrived at his final destination.

Hernandez drew a sharp breath, his eyes widening. Slowly, he raised a hand to his open mouth. He glanced back at the letter, rereading the addressee's name even though he knew it to be an alias. Mesmerized, his gaze darted to the signature at the bottom of the page.

He whispered a gasp, his head shaking slightly.

He had expected it to be that of the person whose family seal he'd recognised; a man he had come to know very well. But, the signatory was that an infinitely more eminent name.

His pulse quickened, and he immediately understood why this particular envelope, above all others, had been sealed the way it had. He quickly dropped the documents back into the envelope and pressed down on the seal, praying it would reseat. He waited a few seconds before lifting his hand.

It held, before beginning to move slightly and popping open

Hernandez grimaced. A wave of panic began to effervesce in the pit of his stomach. He checked his watch.

10.17pm.

He only had a few minutes. Not knowing what else to do, he wetted the underside of the wax with his sweating fingertips and reapplied the pressure hoping it would hold this time.

With his hand still held firmly on the wax blob, he stood and looked around. He crossed the road and waited on the riverbank. As Rome's architecture cast elongating shadows, the usually rampant city sounds had almost completely faded. Hernandez surveyed the length of the river. It had become the city's life blood as it weaved its way from source to mouth. He peered into the rippling water as it brushed against the bank.

The sound of an approaching vehicle followed by the screeching of brakes wrenched him out of his dream. He turned and saw another U.S. Army transport truck pull neatly up to the kerb. The passenger door opened and a soldier wearing a Military Police uniform hopped out. He walked around the front of the truck.

"You have something for me?" He glanced at the envelope in Hernandez's hand.

Hernandez nodded and, praying the seal would hold, handed it to the young man.

The soldier took it without speaking, completed an about turn and walked briskly back to his side of the truck. Hernandez expected to see the door open and the soldier hop back in, but instead watched nervously as the MP walked back around the front of the truck again.

"Can I help you?" Hernandez asked, placing his hands as calmly as possible behind

his back. His eyes darted down to the envelope and the loose flap that the MP was flicking with his thumb.

In one swift movement, the MP unbuttoned his holster and withdrew his sidearm. Without hesitating, he aimed and fired a single shot into Hernandez' chest.

The priest staggered back against the low wall that guarded the river. The soldier walked up to him and, laying a hand on his head, gave him a gentle push.

Father Hernandez' soul had already departed before his lifeless body hit the water some twenty feet below.

A young Swiss Guardsman stood rigidly to attention before the Vatican Guard Commandant, having delivered a terrible message only moments ago. He could feel his skin pale and his mouth run dry. He watched Michael Valent's face redden and nostrils flare and prayed to be dismissed.

Valent drove a clenched fist onto the surface of his teak desk with a force that made the office windows reverberate.

The young Guardsman's heart skipped a beat. He glanced down, expecting to see a crumpled hand such was the impact, but instead saw only a few drops of blood, the glint of a ring and the imprint of the same symbol that had sealed Father Hernandez's fate no more than thirty minutes ago.