

A large, circular stained glass dome is the central focus, featuring a white dove with outstretched wings in the center, surrounded by a radial pattern of yellow and orange glass. The background is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a cathedral interior, showing the silhouettes of people and architectural details like columns and statues.

Peter's Chair

JOHN SIMPSON

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Peter's Chair

By

John Simpson

Chapter One

The Vacant Chair

His Holiness Pope Dominic V had been ill for some time and, as death drew near in the late winter of 2010, the Vatican kept a deathwatch. Battling the cancer that was taking over his frail physical frame, the eighty-two-year-old Holy Father had not appeared in public for the past five months. Once again, the world waited with television cameras focused on the windows of the dying pope's bedroom.

The latest bulletin on Dominic's health suggested that he might not live through the night. Cardinals from around the world were flying into Rome to pray the pope into heaven as they launched the beginnings of the secretive process for his succession. The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit influences the choice of the new pope by inspiring the cardinals who vote for him. This is not to say that God dials up a phone number and talks to the cardinals, but that He makes His presence impactful upon the process.

Although blatant politicking was prohibited while a pope was still alive, the weakness of man can circumvent any law and at times, more than a hint of vying for the keys to the kingdom was acknowledged. The usual handicapping of potential replacements was well underway in Las Vegas as well as the London betting parlors, where the laying on of odds had already begun. In the lead were two Italians, one Englishman, and a Russian. No one could really see a Russian pope so soon after the defeat of Soviet communism, so speculation about Cardinal Merinoff was purely for show. Each of the other candidates had their relative strengths as well as weaknesses as did all of humanity.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Please make sure your seat belts are buckled as we are about to land at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Fiumicino Airport. We hope you have enjoyed your flight with us, and hope to see you again soon."

"Your Eminence, is there anything I can get you before we land?"

"No, thank you, William," I said to my secretary, Monsignor William Hart. "I'm hoping the car will be waiting for us, so we don't have to waste a lot of time standing around after we clear immigration."

William had been with me for some time. In

fact, he had been my secretary since I became a bishop and stayed with me as I rose in the ranks of the Church. However, before he was my secretary, we had dated and become lovers as seminarians. We certainly were not the only ones to find companionship and love in the arms of another cleric, and our passionate sexual relationship took our love to an even higher plane.

Though celibacy was a largely futile concept, it was honored by those determined to make it work for their own reasons. Some men were simply asexual and had no drive to contend with in their day-to-day lives. William and I were young and filled with the passion of youth and lust for life that was now the priesthood. We became partners in more than just the bedroom; we filled in for each other when we couldn't meet a clerical obligation due to scheduling conflicts. We helped each other get through rough periods that occur in every priest's life. In addition to becoming a priestly ministerial team, we became family to each other and pledged our lives and love until the end of our days.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of being in love with William was that I did not have to be alone. We were sharing our lives together and I always had companionship to keep me from becoming lonely. The commitment to celibacy and a single life did not work for either of us. I was lucky to

have found William and I prayed often that he would always be with me. Although the church would never acknowledge our relationship, it benefited from it.

When I became a bishop, my attitude about sex with William underwent much personal scrutiny as it related to the Church's official position on celibacy. I pondered whether it was appropriate to continue our love life now that I was a leader in the Church. After much reflection, prayer, and discussion with William, we decided that if we were to be true to ourselves and rejoice in the gift of love and sexual union that is given to each of us by God, then we would be less than honest if we ignored the physical side of our relationship. Part of the review examined why celibacy was incorporated in the Latin Rite of Catholicism when it was observed by no other branch of the Catholic Church. The protection of Church property from inheritance issues from a potential widow drove much of the debate. As with so many hotly contested issues, it centered on money. How could a priest support a wife on what the Church paid him? To allow a priest to have a family would greatly increase the costs to the Church.

The other major justification for imposing celibacy was that a single priest would have more

time to devote to his flock if he had no other responsibilities. A family of his own would be a definite distraction. The Roman Catholic stance on celibacy spuriously made the clergy members of different faiths as well as the clergy of the Russian, Greek Orthodox, and Old Catholics appear less dedicated.

If a priest never knew the intricacies of loving and being loved or the joy of sexual intimacy, how could he effectively counsel those with problems in these areas? While it isn't impossible for a priest to empathize, he lacks the direct knowledge and experience of the joys and troubles that they can bring. I felt that William and I were more rounded by the experience that we had acquired through our love life together. Even after all these years, he still made me smile when he came into my presence, no matter how long or short a time he had been away from me. We truly were soul mates and, now that I was a cardinal, he was an even more important part of my life and ministry. I certainly would not want to carry out the duties of my office without him.

Our landing was smooth and we were able to exit the plane quickly. As a cardinal, or prince of the Roman Catholic Church, I was waved through customs and exited the airport to find a car from the Vatican waiting. The diplomatic tags and the

priest waiting at the car door made it easy to spot. Even though I was a junior cardinal from America, I was nonetheless an American cardinal and accorded the courtesies usually reserved for far more important senior princes of the Church.

"Welcome to Rome, Cardinal Blair and Monsignor Hart," the priest said as the driver stowed our luggage. "I'm Father Mendoza. I'm sorry that such a sad event is bringing you to Rome this time, Eminence."

"Yes, Father, it is, not to mention the fact that it wasn't all that long ago when we gathered here for the same reason."

Rome traffic was horrendous as usual, as we inched along some roads and whizzed down others en route to the home base of the Roman Catholic Church. We arrived at the Porta Santa Anna, the main entrance to Vatican City. It led into the parking area for Vatican vehicles and held a VIP entrance. The doorway was flanked by two tall men attired in the sixteenth-century uniform that had been worn by the Swiss Guard since its inception. They gave the customary salute to a cardinal and we entered into the ancient walls. Inside were more Swiss Guards, some in the traditional uniform and some in plainclothes. They checked our credentials and made sure we were on a list of those to be admitted.

"Thank you, Your Eminence, and welcome to

the Vatican,” the officer said as he dialed the phone. He contacted the Secretary of State’s office to notify them of my arrival and we were escorted to an office on the second floor where we were met by Monsignor Calisee, secretary to the Secretary of State for the Holy See. Second only to the pope, the Vatican secretary of state wielded great power and influence over the Church while a pope lived, but lost this power when a pope passed away. All in power lost their positions with the exception of the Cardinal Camerlengo, the chamberlain of the Holy See. The current Secretary of State was his Eminence Eugenio Cardinal Caliggio of Venice.

“Welcome, Your Eminence. May I get you anything? Coffee or tea, or maybe something stronger?”

“No, nothing for the time being, Monsignor, thank you. Where is Cardinal Caliggio?” I asked.

“He is at the bedside of the Holy Father. Shall I take you to him?”

“Yes, please.”

We took a private elevator to the third floor of the Vatican where the papal apartments were located. These quarters consisted of nineteen rooms, including a full kitchen, dining room, library, office, study, secretary’s office, medical suite, bedroom, and a private chapel. Also included in the *appartamento pontificio* is a rooftop

garden.

After knocking, we were admitted by one of the Benedictine nuns that operate the pontifical household. She had been crying along with every other nun. As I walked through the apartments of the pope, I recalled being here not that long ago when the last pope had died. Since then, remodeling had added an air of modernity to the space.

As we entered the papal bedroom, we found Cardinal Caliggio, the Secretary of State, assorted aides, and more nuns. As I approached the bed, Caliggio looked up and recognized me. With a smile, he rose and came over to me.

"Cardinal Blair, it is very good to see you again. My eyes and heart are tired, but you bring a small happiness to both."

"Thank you, Your Eminence. It is good to see you again also. How is the Holy Father?"

"He is in very bad shape, I'm afraid. The doctors tell us he will likely not last the night. It is good that you have arrived. Come, let us go to him and I will whisper in his ear that you are here. Perhaps he will hear this glad news."

Caliggio leaned over and whispered into the pontiff's ear that I was here. I bowed my head in prayer that the Lord would soon take his soul and end the suffering stamped plainly on his lined face. I began the rosary silently in my heart when I

was shocked to hear the pope speak my name.

"Brian, is that you?"

"Yes, Holy Father, it is I. I am terribly sad that you are so ill; is there anything I may do for you?"

"Ah, the only thing anyone can do is pray for my sins that they might be forgiven," he answered, and sighed.

After a brief conversation, the pope once again drifted into a semi-comatose state. The doctors found it remarkable that he spoke at all. I began to pray the rosary once again as the nuns resumed their caterwauling. At this rate, if the pope hoped to find any peace at all, he would have to die in order to achieve it.

I spent a few more minutes at the bedside of the dying pontiff, and then went into the little private dining room where coffee and assorted pastries were provided. Caliggio joined me and we sat down at the table.

"It won't be long now, Brian. We didn't think he would be a long-serving pope, but none of us thought it would be this quick. Now we have to go through all this again; electing a new leader, burying the old one, changing the letterhead."

"Changing the letterhead! That's a bit harsh, isn't it?"

Caliggio chuckled softly. "I just wanted to see if you were listening. I, not unlike the pope, am an old man, and only God knows how many years I

have left on Earth. You, on the other hand, are what? Forty-nine? The youngest cardinal since Bishop Julius Doepfner was made a cardinal by Pope John at the age of forty-five. You have many years ahead of you, and you are well-liked. There is no telling how far you will go in the Church."

"Well, Eminence, I can tell you this: I have my hands full as it is with the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. I deal with more politicians and so-called VIPs than I do with the faithful."

"Excuse me, Cardinal Caliggio," a deferent nun interrupted softly, "but the doctors say His Holiness will pass any moment now."

"Thank you, Sister. We will come at once."

As we drew near the bed, the dying man took his last breath. Pope Dominic V was now gone to his heavenly reward and the faithful would be told first by the ringing of the bells of St. Peter's. Whenever a pope died, a precise series of events occurred. After the removal of the pontiff's body, his bed would be stripped clean, and the papal apartments would be vacated. A seal was placed on the main entrance so that none would enter until there was a new occupant on the chair of St. Peter. Despite my knowledge, I was surprised to witness an ancient tradition that I had thought had been put away to gather dust.

The Papal Chamberlain entered the room and lightly struck the deceased pope on the forehead

three times with a silver hammer, simultaneously calling his name. If the pope did not respond, he was considered to be dead, or at the very least to have a bad headache. Alas, Pope Dominic V failed to react to the silver hammer and the process for arranging the funeral and conclave that would elect the new pope began to unfold as dictated by the *Universi Dominici Gregis*.

As the undertaker to the popes entered the room to tend to Dominic's remains, the bells of St. Peter began to toll, announcing the death to the world and commencing the traditional nine days of mourning. I was asked by Caliggio to witness the destruction of the pope's ring and seal so that no forgeries could suddenly appear after his death.

Next, the camerlengo made an official announcement from the steps of the Vatican announcing the death of Dominic V and prayers were led by various cardinals. Word went out to the rest of the world's cardinals that they were needed in Rome once again to elect a new supreme pontiff. It was already decided prior to the pope's demise that he would be buried four days after his death, along with his defaced ring, seal, and copies of important documents that he had authored. Thus was the custom with popes of years gone by.

"Brian, Camerlengo Cardinal Cavvichio has

asked if you would assist me in forming the conclave and act as my administrative secretary for the secret votes."

"I would be honored to assist you, Your Eminence. I am yours to command," I replied to the now former Vatican Secretary of State.

"Excellent. In that case, instead of staying at the official residence for visiting cardinals, you will stay here in guest quarters of the Apostolic Palace. We have much work to do beginning in the morning. I suggest you get some sleep. Monsignor Hart will of course stay here as well. Monsignor Calisee will show you both to the guest quarters. If you need anything, simply dial the number by the phone and a sister or father will get whatever it is that you require. I shall expect you at breakfast at eight-thirty in the morning then. Goodnight, my friend."

"Goodnight, Eminence."

Chapter Two

Is It Too Early For Wine?

After William and I were shown to our rooms, which were across the hall from each other, I unpacked, said my prayers for the former pope, and began to think. Dominic V had been continuously at war with the gay community among others. He refused to interpret the Gospels through the lens of modern theology and never gave up on his crusade. Now, his crusade had ended and the truth of the issue was now being revealed to the deceased pope, as I imagined St. Peter asking him, “What the hell were you doing, Dominic? Why were you dispensing prejudice instead of love as our master taught us?”

The thought of this particular event unfolding in the heavens brought a smile to my face. As a gay cardinal, I had felt the Vatican bit grate in my mouth at Dominic’s edicts on this issue. I had many times given secret aid to the gay

community, as I believed the Church was wrong on the issue of mandatory celibacy along with *Humanae Vitae*, or birth control, as well. I had taken some flak from my conservative brothers in the College of Cardinals over my “lax” attitudes on homosexuality, but it bothered me not. Having a boyfriend for the past twenty-seven years made defending Vatican decrees on celibacy, as well as human sexuality, extremely difficult at best. Perhaps what disturbed me most was the great number of gay clerical personnel inhabiting the Vatican that continued to carry out this pogrom against their secular brothers and sisters.

A knock on my door brought me back to earth and I opened it to find the earthly love of my life looking worried. I motioned him in and he sat down. “What’s wrong, William? You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something. Is old Dominic already roaming the hallways in white, dragging chains behind him like Marley from *A Christmas Carol*?”

“Cardinal Wesley of England phoned me asking if I thought you would accept the papacy if you were voted in at this conclave!”

If it weren’t for the color of your face, I would laugh out loud and tell you that was a very funny joke. You aren’t joking, are you?”

“No. Apparently, there is some unhappiness surfacing among the brethren regarding the

frequency of these conclaves and all the tumult and drama that surrounds them. Some believe that modern-day conclaves resemble the American political system more than an event in which the Holy Spirit plays a significant role. There is a feeling that you would sit in Peter's chair for at least twenty or thirty years."

"It is exactly that reason that others would be dead set against me. There is something to be said for short-reigning popes; the damage they can do is limited by their mortality. I would be around longer than any of the sitting cardinals except perhaps one."

"Well, the other cardinals are all headed to the Vatican, so this issue will only get stronger with each passing hour. Should we stop worrying and just see how this unfolds?"

"I don't see that we have any other choice. I will not campaign for the papacy as if I were running for the county chair's office or the local pig-farming coalition. The Holy Spirit must play a role in the selection of Peter's successor, or we really are no better than the American system of choosing a government. And who says that I even want to be pope! I would be responsible for an entire Church and its government, not to mention the host of problems and issues that arise daily when you are trying to lead over one billion souls to God. That's a heavy burden to shoulder and I'm

not sure that I am strong enough for that. Lastly, it puts my own soul in greater danger than before. If I fail to make the right decisions as the successor to Peter, then I will have to answer for it one day, and I'm not too keen on that prospect."

"I think you would make an outstanding pope and bring much-needed change to both the Vatican and the faithful. With your life expectancy, you could revolutionize the Church for centuries to come."

"William, I just think you want to be papal secretary! Who says I would keep you around anyway?" I joked to lighten the mood.

"Well, I doubt you could live without me now after being in love for all these years and enjoying all those hot nights of sex."

"Oh, be quiet. If I were pope I would have fair-haired young men throwing themselves at me and you could be replaced with a snap of my fingers."

"While that might be true, dear Brian, you wouldn't be in love with those fair-haired men, now would you?"

"Oh, and I do love you, William. I was so lonely until we met and fell in love; you made the burden of becoming a young bishop and then archbishop at such a young age easier to deal with. If I am successful it's a result of your love and support. In reality, you're as responsible for my being named cardinal, but pope? Dear Lord

Jesus, I just don't know."

"Well, if the Holy Spirit moves you forward, then what choice do you have?"

"None, but I will say again: it is not a position that I seek. In fact, it scares me."

We rose, embraced, and said goodnight with a kiss, declining to spend the night together due to where we were. William was very important to me, both as a man and as my devoted secretary. How dear he was to me. I undressed, went to bed, and passed into sleep with a final prayer for Dominic V.

William woke me at six a.m. so I could shower, dress, and say the morning office required of all priests. If I stretched my neck far enough out my window, I could just see the edge of St. Peter's Square. From this obstructed view, I could see the square was quite full of people.

William and I decided to take a walk before joining Cardinal Caliggio for breakfast. We exited the Apostolic Palace itself through a side door and walked to the front toward the square. I could now plainly see that it was indeed full of people, most praying for the recently departed pontiff, many on their knees on the hard cobblestones. In this tightly packed sea of humanity, we could see the religious dress of nuns, priests, and brothers of various orders. Television cameras were everywhere, recording all of it for posterity.

Spotting the red-trimmed black cassock with red silk fascia of a cardinal, as well as the pectoral cross and the zucchetto upon my head, they began to focus on me. I thought it better not to be on worldwide television at this time and stopped my progress.

"Time to go back in, William. We have begun to draw attention." As I turned to go back, I nearly knocked over a Swiss Guard who had unbeknownst to me followed us out with his partner.

"Excuse me, Your Eminence," he apologized. "The Swiss Guard has protected the Vatican since the year fifteen hundred and six and we have never lost a cardinal to the mobs yet. Since you have been named secretary to the conclave, you are now under our protection whenever you leave the secured buildings of the Apostolic Palace."

"Ah, I did not realize that, Sergeant. Thank you. Forgive me if we caused any alarm with our sudden walk in public."

"Your eminence is free to walk where you wish, but now with a guard present."

"I understand. We must hurry now; I'm due at breakfast with Cardinal Caliggio."

"No wonder they saw you; the Swiss Guards are the only ones more colorful than a cardinal," William said with a laugh.

Finally reaching the dining room used by the

Vatican Secretary of State, we found its former occupant waiting on us for breakfast.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Good morning, Your Eminence. Yes, I did, surprisingly. We just took a quick walk to the square and I was amazed at the number of people. I was also surprised by the Swiss Guards turning up directly behind us."

"Yes, I should have mentioned that to you last night when you accepted the post as my secretary for the conclave. You're now considered essential to the continuity of the Church, and therefore under guard. Don't worry; as soon as the conclave is finished, they will disappear."

"There is so much going on all at once; it's really incredible."

"Indeed. Coffee?"

"Is it too early for wine or scotch?" I asked with a smile. "I have a feeling that this is going to be a very active day," I responded.

Caliggio smiled back with understanding. "I forget sometimes those cardinals who have never spent any length of time here at the Vatican don't comprehend the controlled chaos that is normal for us. I fear just as you begin to get used to it, you'll be going home."

"Well, Eminence, that will mean that our task is complete and a successor to St. Peter has been chosen. We all pray for that moment."

We chatted about the upcoming day's events while we ate breakfast. As I enjoyed my third cup of excellent coffee, Cardinal Cavvichio entered the dining room and bid us all a good morning. He looked both tired and worried.

"It does not appear that you slept well last night, Eminence," said Caliggio.

"No, in fact I did not. I was woken three times with calls from heads of state asking inane questions. Then before I knew it, morning prayer arrived, and now breakfast. Are you both ready to get to work organizing the conclave?"

"Yes, Eminence, we are ready to begin our work. I understand that ninety percent of the cardinals eligible to vote for the new pope are en route and should be arriving throughout the day. Preparations are already underway to receive them in the new cardinals' residence, which has been completed since the death of the previous pope."

"Excellent. As a longtime close friend of former Secretary of State Caliggio, as well as the former pope, I would like you to give the homily at the funeral on Wednesday. Can you prepare for that and continue your work forming the conclave?"

"Yes. I have the best possible secretary here in the person of Cardinal Blair. I can attend to both. I am honored that you have chosen to forego your right to give the homily and have chosen me for

this task.”

“It is only fitting, as your history with Dominic was so extensive and you served him so well as Secretary of State. Since you are both ready, may I suggest you get started? We don’t have much time to put this together. The first meeting of the conclave will be the fifth morning after we place Dominic V in the crypt below the altar of St. Peter’s.”

“Yes, Your Eminence. We shall work out of my old office if you have no objections.”

“That will be fine. Please keep me up-to-date on arrangements. Also, don’t forget to factor in security for the Sistine Chapel. Before it is sealed for the election proceedings, it must be swept for electronic listening devices.”

“Of course, Your Eminence.”

As Cavvichio left the dining room, Caliggio and I looked at each other. “Maybe you were right; wine would be the appropriate drink this morning.”

Chapter Three

A Papal See of Red

As we got to work on this first morning without a pope and attended to our new duties, a steady trickle became a torrent of cardinals pouring into Rome. The current College of Cardinals consisted of one hundred and seventy-eight men, of which one hundred and twenty were eligible to vote for the new pope. The others were either over the age of eighty and thus not eligible to vote, or were ill and could not travel to Rome.

As Secretary of the Conclave, it was my duty to greet all of the arrivals, get them settled into their new temporary residence, and see to any immediate needs that they might have that their personal secretaries could not attend to. Everything was going smoothly, despite the number of people involved in almost every aspect of the process. Mass was scheduled at six p.m. at

the Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano, with the cardinals who had arrived by then. The Basilica is the official Cathedral Church of Rome for the pope, as he is the Bishop of Rome in addition to being the vicar of Christ on earth. It is also considered the prime church of all Catholicism, even above the Basilica of St. Peter, and is called the "Mother Church." Mass would not be said again at the altar in St. Peter's until a successor was chosen.

As I went about my duties, William was by my side assisting in whatever matters he could. His most important duty was to screen those seeking an appointment with me. One cardinal insisted on seeing me and was determined to wait in the outer office until he did.

"William, tell Cardinal Rodriguez I will see him now please."

"Yes, Your Eminence."

As William held the door, the sixty-nine-year-old cardinal from Brazil entered the office and I waved him to a seat in front of my desk. I had been given the adjoining office to Cardinal Caliggio so we could be in close proximity during the period before entering conclave.

"Thank you for seeing me, Eminence. I know you are quite busy."

"Not at all, Felix. What is it that I may do for you?"

"Let me be blunt, as you Americans like to say. There is talk among the brethren that you would be a suitable replacement for Dominic of recent memory; You have youth, intelligence, faith, and the administrative ability to handle such a daunting task. What is your reaction to such a notion?"

"Your Eminence, I rely on the Holy Spirit to influence the choice of the next pope, and that may not happen until the doors are closed, sealing us into the Sistine Chapel. I think there are many others in the College of Cardinals that have more wisdom and piety and are more worthy to become our next shepherd. I appreciate this compliment, but I think the chances are remote that I shall succeed Dominic."

"If you believe as I do that the Holy Spirit is involved in the election of the pope, then you know no better than I who is suited for the position, do you?"

"True, but let me say this; I have no ambition to become pope. My views would surely shock some of our brethren and then there would be a great wailing and gnashing of teeth over my election."

"Then that, too, would be of the Holy Spirit and therefore could not be a bad thing. I have done what I came to do: to let you know that you are well thought of in many quarters... especially for an American."

I chuckled as he intended I should and rose to give him the kiss of peace. William showed him out of my office and then returned.

"What was so important that he just had to see you?"

"He wanted me to know that I might make a good pope, especially for an American," I said with a shake of my head. "Of course, I should have reminded him that it takes two-thirds of the electors to actually elect a pope, and not just a handful of forward-thinking cardinals murmuring my name."

"Well, that's two different sources now that say your name is being mentioned for election. I wouldn't be in a rush to brush that off. If it is the will of the Holy Spirit, then you will be elected, whatever your personal preference on the matter."

"Well, enough of speculation and rumors. Let us get back to work."

As Caliggio and I went about our work for the conclave, others took over the plan for Dominic's burial. Heads of state were notifying the Camerlengo's office of who would and who would not be attending the funeral Mass. Security was going to be a nightmare, as it was every time the world came to the Vatican.

The day before the late pope's funeral, all of the cardinal electors had arrived in Rome and been

situated in their temporary quarters of the Domus Sanctæ Marthæ, adjacent to St. Peter's Basilica. I found many of them to be extremely friendly, while others remained aloof, more in keeping with the demeanor of the typical cardinal. I frankly could not wait for the entire affair to be over so that I might return to my archdiocese with its familiar problems and blessings. I found the air at the Vatican to be both stuffy and ponderous.

By the next morning, all arrangements were finalized for the formal burial of the deceased pontiff as well as for the world heads of states that planned to attend the funeral. Caliggio had met briefly with all of them while I attended to the details of the conclave, which would start in less than five days. I had no time whatsoever to spend with William while we worked. We met briefly at bedtime, kissed goodnight, and went to our separate bedrooms to fall into an exhausted sleep.

The morning of the funeral, I awoke at six a.m., said the morning office taken from the Office for the Dead with William, and went to the dining room where I found both Cardinal Caliggio and Cardinal Cavvichio eating a light breakfast. I ordered only orange juice and coffee with a bagel.

"Well, Brian, is everything ready for the conclave?" asked Cavvichio with a smile.

"Yes, Your Eminence. I have followed the instructions to the letter. The only thing left to do

is to complete the security sweep. Vatican security is waiting for my word to do so."

"Excellent work. I have had several compliments from the other cardinals about your handling of the arrangements. You are to be congratulated; it is not so easy to keep this group of pious old men happy!" We all laughed at the truth of this statement.

I had no major duties today other than attending to the honors and burial of the pope as a cardinal. Caliggio would give the homily and be center stage and I would be in the background where I was more comfortable. Through television, the eyes of the world were upon us, and everything was scheduled down to the last moment. Even now, there were prayers continuing on the steps of St. Peter's for the assembled crowd that covered every available inch of St. Peter's Square to witness the rites for a fallen pope.

As the day wore on, mass was concluded and the body of the pope was shown to the people for the last time. Dominic was laid to rest in a wooden coffin inside a marble vault next to many of his predecessors deep under the floor of the altar of St. Peter's. Inside, as was mandated, were the altered papal seal and ring and a few of the most important documents issued by Dominic during his reign as pope. The tomb was sealed and we filed out of the crypt and back into the fresh air.

Once inside the Basilica itself, we took off our vestments and began to think of the work ahead of us all.

It was now past five p.m. and everyone went to dinner. Since the conclave began in just four days, no one was permitted to leave the Vatican until it was over. The great doors were sealed in all areas that housed the cardinals and would remain so until these dignitaries were escorted to the Sistine Chapel for the beginning of the election process. I did a final check to make sure that I had missed nothing and that all was ready for the morning's events. Satisfied, I went to bed early, as did everyone else who wasn't doing sentry duty in the Vatican that night.

I followed my usual custom of saying goodnight to my longtime companion, who I found I missed sleeping with terribly. I missed being able to hold him throughout the night. This physical contact was far more important to me than the sex. However, I did not want to risk scandal on the eve of so important an event. I closed and locked my door, said my prayers, and went to sleep after once again reviewing my duties for the next day.

Chapter Four

Better Get a Bale of Hay

Since the year 1492, cardinals, guided by the Holy Spirit, have met in the Sistine Chapel to choose the next pope, and so it was today. After a full lunch, the cardinals proceeded to the Sistine Chapel while singing “Veni Creator Spiritus.” There a sort of roll call was taken to make sure that those who were in residence for the conclave were in fact inside the chapel. For, once the chapel was sealed, the doors could not reopen until a successor to Peter was chosen.

The cardinals would use a tiny door at the rear of the chapel that led to the residence hall and nowhere else. I had also ensured that everything necessary was on hand. These items ranged from the mundane, such as pen and paper, to the more esoteric straw or hay that would be burned to produce either black or white smoke from the temporary chimney. The holy smoke would rise

from the chapel to announce to the world when a new pope was elected. An oath was taken by all electors to follow the rules, defend the papacy and ignore suggestions from secular leaders. Vatican Security swept the Sistine Chapel and certified that it was clear of listening devices. All cardinals were accounted for and the process was begun. The words “Extra omnes” – roughly, “Everybody else, out” in Latin – were uttered by the master of the papal liturgical celebrations. He then closed the doors and the conclave was officially underway.

As we all settled into the chairs that had been set up for all electors, one of the brethren poured water for everyone. We first listened to two speeches made by the Senior Cardinal of the College and Cardinal Cavvichio. Ritual dictates that two secret ballots will be taken that very first afternoon and it was time for the first one. As the votes were counted, no one cardinal had the two-thirds required to be elected pope. In fact, the field was so varied that in order to clear it, three cardinals declared that they would not accept the papacy. Not one cardinal came anywhere near the one hundred and eight votes needed to be elected pope. The ballots were then put into the small stove and mixed with wet straw so that black smoke poured out from the chimney, informing the world that no one had been elected. At the

sight of the dark smoke, the crowd moaned and the numerous television stations dutifully reported this fact to their audiences.

The conclave broke up into smaller groups speaking in hushed tones. Several prayers were led by the leading contenders for the papacy to induce the Holy Spirit to allow the cardinals to see His will. A couple of cardinals were now openly campaigning for the man they believed would best guide the church. No one campaigned for himself, as this would have been seen as unworthy. As I was sitting with Cardinal Caliggio, a small delegation of younger cardinals approached us. I assumed they wanted to talk with Caliggio, so I got up to excuse myself.

"No, please stay, Cardinal Blair; it is you we wish to speak with," said Cardinal Hu of Taiwan.

"What may I do for you?" I asked.

"We need an answer from you. Would you accept election to the papacy?"

I sat back down in my seat and stared up at the five cardinals. I really didn't know what to say. It is one thing to hear vague rumors, but quite another to be confronted openly with the possibility.

"Brothers, I really don't think I am the right man to follow Dominic. You all know that I am not a conservative member of the college and my beliefs might chafe more than a couple of the

brethren.”

“Eminence, it is precisely that reason that we come to ask you this question. We believe we need another John Paul the First, and you fit that style more than anyone else who is eligible. We need young blood with new approaches to the problems of the world for a new century in the Vatican. We need to become relevant once again in the lives of not only our people, but also all of the world’s people. It is long past the time when we need to throw open the windows in the Apostolic Palace and let the fresh air of a Vatican Three enter into these sacred spaces. Would you accept the vote?”

I thought for a moment and said a quick prayer for guidance. To drag the Roman Church into the twenty-first century would be a monumental task. It would be necessary to abolish some of the archaic stances of the Church that had harmed the Body of Christ. Was the Holy Spirit trying to do exactly that by nudging me toward the vacant chair of Peter?

“Brothers, I really think you should reconsider, but if you insist, you may put my name on the next ballot and see what response it provokes from the electorate.”

“Deo Gratias” — “Thanks be to God” — was the murmured response from the cardinals in our little circle. They turned and walked away,

breaking up and going over to other cardinals to whisper. I sat in my seat a little stunned at the mere possibility that my name would appear on a ballot for papal election while Cardinal Caliggio, who was present when the group approached me, stated his support for my election.

After another twenty minutes of talk, a call for the second poll of the afternoon was made. Everyone marked down his choice. The votes were then brought up to the voting box and deposited under the watchful eye of the cardinal appointed to this duty. The ballots were counted to make sure they equaled the number of electors and the names of those who'd received votes were called out three times by three different cardinals.

"Cardinal Blair, sixty-two votes."

"Cardinal Fernandez, forty-eight votes."

The remaining votes were broken up among various cardinals. The ballots, which had been pierced and placed on a string, were burned with wet straw. Black was the final color of the day.

The conclave adjourned and we went immediately to the special housing built for such occasions. We were totally cut off from the outside world, without television, newspapers, radio, or phones. As the surprise leader in votes, I was the center of attention with Cardinal Fernandez sharing the limelight. He began to openly campaign for the office, while I hung back. I didn't

pretend that I was too pious to lobby for votes; I simply refused to sully the tradition of the election process.

After dinner, there were a series of talks with most of the cardinals present, and I was asked to lead night prayer from the Divine Office. As I presided over the final prayer of the Church for the day, I let myself imagine what it would be like to preside as pope over all future meetings of these same cardinals. It was an utterly strange feeling and not one I was comfortable with. I retired immediately after night prayer and, alone in my room, I prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit as to what I should do. I didn't receive an answer.

The house awoke at six a.m. and we went into morning prayer, presided over this time by Cardinal Fernandez. We ate breakfast and proceeded back to the Sistine Chapel, which was being swept again for listening devices as we arrived to take our places. The rear door was closed once again, and we were left alone to conduct the next phase of the election.

The cardinals decided to amend the rules by unanimous consent and moved that the last two candidates to receive the most votes would be the only names on the ballot. Abruptly, I had a fifty-fifty chance of being elected pope this very day. After an opening prayer by the Cardinal

Camerlengo, which I had trouble concentrating on, the ballots were passed out. I could feel the mounting air of anticipation as the brethren cast their ballots into the box one by one. I must admit that I did vote for myself. After the verification, the tally was read.

“Cardinal Blair, ninety-one votes.”

“Cardinal Fernandez, twenty-nine votes.”

I was stunned. I could hardly breathe, let alone acknowledge that I had just become the Supreme Roman Pontiff of the Catholic Church. As I looked up from the floor, I found the Dean of the College of Cardinals standing before me.

“Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?” he solemnly inquired.

“I accept with the help of Almighty God,” I responded.

“What new name will you be known as?”

“I take the name of John.”

Applause broke out from the assembled cardinals, as I was officially designated Pontifex Maximus, or the Holy Roman Pontiff. The sound of all of the Cardinals dropping their baldichini over their seats, leaving only my own standing to signify that I was elected, was a sight and sound I shall never forget. One by one, they pledged their allegiance to me as pope and I was then led to the “room of tears,” where the papal tailor was waiting with a half-dozen white soutanes and

skullcaps. No matter who was elected, the tailor was able to dress the new pope immediately in the traditional garments. A brocaded red and gold stole, the symbol of the priesthood, was waiting to be placed around my neck. It draped down the front of my white cassock, which was overlaid with a white rochet, a red mozzeta, and pectoral cross. The red zucchetto upon my head was now replaced with a white one.

I then reentered the Sistine Chapel. At this time, the Cardinal Camerlengo placed the Ring of the Fisherman upon my finger. A personalized one was being created for me and would be put on my finger during my installation as pope.

Things began to whirl past me now as events accelerated. The Dean of the College of Cardinals left the conclave. Ballots were burned without straw and white smoke rose from the chimney to tell the world that a new pope had been elected. The crowd in St. Peter's Square roared their approval and the news was flashed around the world.

After a few minutes more and when I was ready, the dean went out onto the balcony and announced in Latin: *"Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum. Habemus Papam. Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum Brian Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Blair qui sibi nomen imposuit John the Twenty-fourth."*

This was quickly translated by news anchors into many languages. English speakers heard: "I announce to you a great joy. We have a pope. The most eminent and reverend Lord, the Lord Brian, Cardinal Blair of the Holy Roman Church who takes to himself the name John the Twenty-fourth."

The interregnum, or the time between leaders, was over. The crowd and the world were shocked by my election. No one had thought it possible that an American would be elected any more than a Russian, and my age was a shock to many. To a world used to elderly men in the role of Vicar of Christ on Earth, I was a baby in comparison. Nevertheless, the crowd roared their approval of the vacant See of Peter being filled. People openly wept in St. Peter's Square and began to chant my new name.

I stepped out onto the balcony next to the Dean of the College of Cardinals and gave my first apostolic blessing as pope. This was known as the "urbi et orbi" or "To the City and to the world" blessing. Thus, with all of the cardinals crowded out on the two side balconies that flank the central one upon which I stood, I began:

"To the peoples of the eternal city and to the world I give you my greetings and my first apostolic blessing from this balcony. May Almighty God bless you always, may He keep you

and your loved ones close to Him, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The people once again roared their approval as I smiled, waved, and made the sign of the cross over them. This went on for several minutes and then I turned and went back into the room.

Chapter Five

I Hope They Know What They've Done

As I reentered the room directly off the Loggia of Blessings balcony, a line of Vatican bishops and other important clerics were waiting to kneel and kiss my ring in pledge of loyalty and fidelity. Once the line ended, I was taken back into the tailor's room, where my measurements were taken in order to make the papal regalia needed for different events. I was suddenly ravenous and asked William to find out when lunch was scheduled. It was my wish to eat with all of the cardinals.

The Dean of the College of Cardinals brought to me a couple of documents to sign that stated that I had officially accepted the papacy and that I had chosen to be called John XXIV. I was then able to pull William aside for a real talk.

"I am stunned and, needless to say, I'll need you more than ever now. You will be papal

secretary and move into the offices designated for that position. We will be making some changes around here, so after lunch, if there isn't some ceremony to perform, let's meet in the papal apartments and discuss these things."

William *didn't* smile *but* said, "Yes, Holy Father."

I smiled at the man I loved. "Oh, knock it off. You're just bucking to be made a bishop now."

William smiled and said he would find out about lunch and get back to me, giving me no response to my joke about his wanting to be a bishop. As I watched him walk away, I had a silent hope in my heart that the Lord would grant us both a long life here in the Vatican and that we would actually make changes that would benefit the people of God. Too much rigidity had made the Church irrelevant in many people's lives and I wished to change that. In order to accomplish it, I knew that I would have to fire some people entrenched in various places, and that could be dangerous. I also detected something in William that I was not use to seeing. Was it fear? Uncertainty? Could it have been unhappiness? I would find out as soon as we were alone and away from the eyes of not only the college of cardinals, but the entire world.

The tailor finished his work and promised to have all of the essentials finished by the morning.

It was custom that the first morning brought with it a wardrobe that would allow the pope to be properly dressed anywhere he needed to go. I thanked Giovanni, gave him my blessing, and left the room to look for William. I found all of the cardinals still standing around waiting on me.

“My brothers, let us have lunch and celebrate the beginning of a papacy that you have faithfully placed into my hands. May God guide me always.”

William appeared and announced that they could now serve us if we went to the cardinals’ housing. As we made our way to the Domus Sanctæ Marthæ, where the cardinals would continue to stay until the installation ceremony, everyone chatted with a sense of relief. The death of a pope is a difficult event for the college to deal with and the election of a new one relieves much of the anxiety that builds up over this period. I could still hear the crowds in St. Peter’s Square cheering and praying for my welfare and the health of the Church.

When we entered the dining room, I noticed that a white chair had been placed at the head of the table for me. I said a blessing over the food and we all sat down to lunch, William to my right and the dean to my left. As the first course was placed before us, I tapped my fork against my water glass.

"My brother bishops, I wish to announce at this time that Monsignor William Hart will be my papal secretary while I am pope. He has served me well as bishop, archbishop, and cardinal, and now I believe he will continue to serve me well as pope. It is my intention to elevate William to the rank of bishop."

The assembled cardinals all clapped in approval. William had an excellent reputation for efficiency and brains, and many were relieved that a stranger would not hold this key position, requiring everyone else to get to know the new man. Many of the cardinals had encountered William at various functions and seen his work for me in my various positions.

William stood up. "Thank you, Holy Father, for your continued confidence in me. I will serve you as your secretary without fail day or night to the best of my abilities."

"Knowing William all these years, I heard him say the words that I and the others would expect to hear, but they weren't said in a way that rang true to my ears. I was now convinced that something was wrong. Did he not support my election as Pope? No, that couldn't be it. What was the damn problem?"

Again, everyone clapped and began to eat lunch. There was a general air of goodwill and everyone felt that God's guidance had helped the conclave make the right choice, in spite of the fact

that there were votes for my polar opposite Cardinal Fernandez. I wondered what they would think after the changes began. I had to keep in mind the death and probable murder of Pope John Paul I, and the reverse course the Church took when John Paul II was elected. I would have to take certain measures to ensure that I did not suffer the fate of the first John Paul.

We finished lunch and I left the building with William and the dean of the college, who was going to reopen the papal apartments now that there was a new pope. It took us more than twelve minutes just to reach the private elevator that took us to the third floor. There we found nuns waiting to get into the apartments.

"Good afternoon, Holy Father; welcome to your new home," said the mother superior of the order that took care of the apartments.

"Thank you, Mother; I appreciate your welcome."

All present observed the seal being broken, verifying that no one had entered since the removal of Dominic's body. There were actually two doors with seals on them. The first was the initial entrance to the apartments, and then a second seal on the papal bedroom itself. As we entered the inner sanctum where many popes before me had slept, I went over to the window. Below, on St. Peter's Square, thousands still

cheered, celebrating my election. Some caught sight of me, easily identified all in white, and the entire crowd turned to look up at the window. I responded with a wave to the crowd and backed away from the window to the sounds of acclaim.

When I turned around, I found a plethora of nuns moving about like a swarm of bees, practically renovating the bedroom and bathroom. Everything not bolted down was taken out and washed.

"Mother Superior, I would like this bed removed and a larger one to replace it. I tend to roll around a lot and don't want to end up on the floor."

"Of course, Holy Father; we will do that at once," came the reply.

She picked up the telephone by the bed and called someone within the cavernous bowels of the Vatican to get the job done. At least the nuns would not be dragging the bed out! A few moments later, four rather large men came in, bowed slightly to me, and took the twin bed out. Within an hour, it was replaced by a queen-sized bed. Now, on the rare occasion that William might sleep with me for a few hours, we would both be more comfortable. When the nuns had finished making the room habitable and departed to clean the attached offices, I closed the door to my inner rooms and sat down with William.

“Well, my love, it seems we have a new address! I still can’t believe this has happened, but the mere fact that I can appear at that window and make the crowd below go mad is proof enough. We have many things to speak of and we should cover a couple of them now so you can get to work on them.

“First, contact the Archdiocese of Washington, and tell the senior auxiliary bishop that he is now at least temporarily in charge of Washington. Have my personal things packed up, along with yours, and get them shipped over here as soon as possible. Check into the whole diplomatic status issue, which may very well speed up the shipment. Arrange for our Scotties to be transported here as soon as possible. I miss them already.

“Second, contact that very handsome gay police sergeant that we met in Wisconsin who arranged for my protection on our visit there last October. Ask him if he would be interested in taking charge of my personal security. I want a layer of security around me that is not part of the local system. I want personal guys; not Vatican police, not the Swiss Guard, none of that. For close protection, I want our own guys, and I want them to be American or British. John Paul the First had all of the protection available here and he was still disposed. If need be, contact the United States

Secret Service and get input from them on personal protection. This is a priority so get on this one fast. I want to start making changes and I want to be set up right before I begin. You are also to have a bodyguard, no arguments."

"Brian, do you really think it necessary to go this far? To include me?"

"Though no one knows we're lovers, you are known to be my friend and confidant. The one way to get to me is through you. Please do as I ask."

"All right, if you say so. I know better than to argue with you when you sound like this."

"I am going to make some very powerful enemies when I get going, and there will be those who will decide to strike out at me. They must not succeed."

"Brian, we need to talk, without interruption."

"I know something is bothering you badly. What is it?"

"I don't want to start it and then get interrupted by a nun or some other functionary. Please, let's go somewhere where we can talk."

"Okay, let's go to the room I had before I was elected Pope."

We walked out of the Papal apartments and headed towards where the guest rooms were maintained one floor below. Various assistants and clerics wanted to accompany us and I waved

them off saying that I would be back shortly. After a couple of minutes we arrived at my temporary room and entered. William checked to make sure no one was in the adjoining room and when he said we were alone, I locked the door.

I motioned to the sofa against the far wall and we sat down.

"Okay William, what is wrong? You have been upset since the moment you learned that I had been elected Pope. Why?"

"Brian, neither one of us ever expected this to happen unless I'm wrong. Am I?"

"No, me being Pope is the last thing in the world I would have expected to happen in that conclave. The fact that I'm an American alone I would have thought would have kept me out of the Chair of Peter. But, again, why is this causing you so much stress?"

"Don't you see Brian? Our entire world is now upside down. We have gone from very little privacy when you were a Cardinal, to absolutely no privacy now that you are Pope. Look what it was like just to come to these rooms. You had to say no to no less than seven well-meaning clerics. This is going to have a great impact on our relationship. The other thing is that I of course did not even have a chance to talk to you about your being Pope before you came out of the Sistine Chapel. It was a done deal."

"Ah, I see. You feel threatened by my elevation?"

"Brian, you know that I grew up in a house that was always at war ending, in my parents divorcing. I got through high school with good grades, and then had to struggle to get into college because there was no money for that luxury. But my Mother worked 16 hours a day saving money from working two jobs, combined with student loans, and I got to college.

I applied for the Seminary and was accepted. This was an entirely new world and one where I eventually met you and began our relationship. I began to find stability that I was lacking in childhood. We had to be so careful that we weren't found out. Any physical or emotional attachment to another seminarian would have resulted in our being tossed out on our asses. But we were careful, we worked hard, studied together, supported each other and occasionally made love in secretive places like two school boys. We bore great guilt for enjoying each other's bodies and our love began our last year in Seminary.

Finally, we were ordained Deacons, and then our date for ordination to the Priesthood was set. We celebrated that night by making love until just before the sun came up. You had brought not one, but two bottles of our favorite wine, of which we

drank all.

If you recall, we had a bit of a hangover the next day and were grateful that we had no commitments for a week before we had to report to the parish for duty pending our ordination which was two weeks later."

"I remember all of this William, why are you going over all this now?"

"Let me finish and you will see. After we were made Priests, we were assigned to our first parishes, and we maintained our relationship. This continued on until we both ended up in the same parish—you as Pastor, and me as your Associate. Things really couldn't have been better then that. We were in the ideal position where we lived and worked together under the same roof. The parish took off, enrollment increased, a new church was built, and the people were happy. Our love grew even stronger and more solid. Then you were named a Bishop, and your public persona began to increase. After six months, you were able to arrange for me to become your secretary and I moved into the Bishop's Residence with you. Your public ministry became our public ministry as I was at your side every step of the way.

Now, if you recall, we never really had any difficulty in justifying our love or our sex lives. We realized that the celibacy system was archaic and unworkable. We went all through that and at

the time neither one of us had any problems with it. We made love relatively guilt free and were happy as we could be.

Then you were made a Cardinal. I continued on with you in an official and personal capacity, but I started to have some concern over our personal relationship now that you were a “Prince” of the Church. We got by that after many conversations and were able to continue to justify our ignoring the celibacy requirement of the church as being an ongoing mistake uncorrected by the Pope by not releasing his priests from this rule.

And now we find ourselves today in our current position. You ARE the church. You have become Pope. You represent the Catholic Faith, for better or worse. How can we carry on just like nothing out of the ordinary has happened? How can we have sex again now that you are the Pope? How? And if we do, can I still respect you as Pope even though we are having sex? Over the years Brian, I have been always proud of you no matter what you were engaged with. Whether it was comforting a child at a parent's funeral, or giving the President of the United States spiritual advice, you have done it from the core of your heart and faith. I don't want to be the reason or cause for you being unable to continue to do that to the World now that you are Pope. Do you understand?”

"No William, I don't. You and I are the same men we were this time yesterday. We haven't changed. I still love you as much as I did ten years ago, if not more. I do understand that you are worried that if we are found out with me as Pope, that it would bring the Church down. Do I really have to remind you of the early and late history of this church? Do you recall how many early Popes fathered children out of wedlock and even made a couple of those children Cardinals in the church? Do you know how many Popes have been gay? I am certainly not the first, and not even the first in this last century. And yet, the Church has survived. The church will survive with yet again another gay Pope. Is it the sex you are afraid of or the love?"

"No, it's the sex part. All that you say about previous popes is true. There can be no denying any of it. My point is that you have a unique opportunity to bring change to this stuffy old church and to the world, and nothing should detract you from that. This thing is bigger than either one of us Brian. Don't we have a bigger obligation to others now that you are Pope than we have to each other?"

"So, it's alright if we continue to love each other as strongly as we do, but just not right to have sex? Remember, sex is a gift from God that enables two people to express that love between them

when its used for its ultimate good. So, you would have us deny a gift from God in order to ease your conscience?"

"Are you getting angry with me?"

"No William, I am not getting angry. I am trying to understand what has taken hold of you. Are you saying that you would feel much better if we cease to make love after all these years, but continue to love one another in every other way?"

"Yes, I think that's exactly what I am saying."

"I must think on all of this. But for now, we must go back as I'm sure their all looking for me by now."

We got up and left the guest room and returned to the Papal apartments where sure enough, everyone was looking for the new Pope. Once inside, William asked, "Shall I get started now on the calls?"

"Yes, let us begin what must be done."

After William left, I wandered around the rest of the papal apartments and found my own private chapel, where I spent a few moments in quiet prayer and reflection on what William and I had just spoken about. Did he have a valid point? Now that I was Pope, shouldn't I correct the ongoing mistake that I blamed the last couple of popes for not correcting? My peace did not last long, however; I was interrupted by one of the nuns.

"Holy Father, Cardinal Caliggio needs to see you."

"Very well. Ask him to go to my private office."

After a few more moments, I finished my prayers and left the small chapel for my office a few dozen feet away. As I entered, Cardinal Caliggio got up and kissed my ring.

"Holy Father, sorry to bother you so soon, but a matter of state has come up. As you know, when Dominic died, we all lost our jobs with a few exceptions. Currently you have no Secretary of State, and the matter I bring before you would be properly handled by that office. Have you thought about who you will name to replace me?"

"No, I have not. Should I replace you?"

"That is entirely your prerogative, Holy Father. I am at your disposal wherever I may best serve the Church."

"How long have you been Secretary of State?"

"I have held this post for seven years now."

"What is this matter that requires a secretary of state to handle?"

"We are getting phone calls from various heads of state who wish an audience at the Vatican or to invite you to visit their countries. This is a matter that is handled on a diplomatic scale and when dealing directly with my old counterparts, protocol dictates that this be done by the Vatican Secretary of State."

"Caliggio, here is what I want to do. I wish to reappoint you to the post of Secretary of State effective immediately. I do, however, reserve the right to replace you should I find cause or reason to do so, or if I believe another man would be even better at the job. Will you accept on that premise?"

"I would be most honored, Holy Father, to accept your kind appointment."

"Please have the document prepared at once so that I may sign it today."

Cardinal Caliggio kissed my ring and departed a very happy man. As he left, Monsignor Hart came into my office.

"William, I just reappointed Caliggio as Secretary of State, at least on a temporary basis. I asked him to have the appointment document drawn up for my signature today."

"That is a wise move. We need someone who knows how to function on the world diplomatic stage and knows whom to contact in which country. He will be a great asset to you. Now, as for your requests: The Scotties will be transported the day after tomorrow and will be here on Saturday. Since they are coming directly to the Vatican from the airport, they do not have to be quarantined. As for our personal belongings, they should be sent by the middle of next week via expedited shipment. You were right; your belongings are classed as diplomatic material and

will be shipped with a lot less red tape than usual.

"I was able to get hold of the sergeant, but he had to turn us down. He's honored to have been asked but he doesn't want to leave his family behind. He suggested we contact a former Treasury agent that he was friendly with who is no longer with the Secret Service as of four months ago. I have his number and will call him later tonight when it is daytime in Wyoming."

"Do we know why he left the Secret Service?"

"Not officially, but it would seem the way the sergeant put it, that it might be because of sexual orientation."

"Well, contact him and see if he is interested. If so, bring him over for an interview."

"I was given this schedule by the nuns. It contains the usual schedule for morning prayer, Mass, and papal audiences, among other things. Is there anything in particular you want to add to the agenda?"

"Yes. Before the cardinals leave town, I want a conference with them. I intend to lay out the coming changes. Find out whom to trust around here and if you can't find anyone, then import someone. Draw up a papal decree ending *Humanae Vitae*. John Paul the First didn't do it immediately and his sudden death prevented him from ever doing it. I won't make that mistake. It is time to end the restrictions on birth control. I will

sign the document right in front of them and order it promulgated. I will issue another papal directive within a month or so on the entire gay issue, or I might just do it at the same time as the other bull. It is time to finally deal with this chestnut. Make sure there is a lot of theology to back up my position on scriptural mistranslations, including the exact year and monastic community that changed the intent of the Sodom story."

"Yes, of course. Well, they asked for it, and you're sure gonna give it to them."

"It's interesting how a group of cardinals voted for the most conservative of our group, and the larger group voted for the most liberal of our group. It tells me that we are a divided church on more than one level. John Paul the Second surely stacked the College of Cardinals with conservatives, but they are beginning to die off, and I will only appoint new cardinals who are more progressive in their faith and theology.

"I've been thinking about another thing. There are more than enough rooms in the papal apartments for you to have a bedroom within. Take one of the studies, and make it into your bedroom. This will also make it much easier for us to share the bed in my bedroom. What do you think of that idea?"

"I think it's gonna cause a lot of tongues to wag. No pope has ever had his secretary that close, and

it will be seen as a gay thing, you watch. Especially after the changes you're going to institute. Are you sure you want to do this, especially in light of our conversation about our relationship? If we're no longer going to have a physical relationship, then it really isn't necessary that we live in the same suite of rooms, is it?"

"Oh, so you've made up your mind about that issue for both of us, is that what you're saying? After 27 years, you're just going to change the parameters to fit what you believe the church wants or need? We're no longer going to be physical, is that it? Well, dammit, I didn't decide anything! What this boils down to is you're trying to make me decide between us or the church. Well, I got a newsflash for you William, I am the church, for better or worse. I'm the church in all it's human frailty, it's needs, it's wants, it's desires, and its responsibilities. In the end, I make the decisions of what's best for the church. Did you ever stop for a moment to think that if you were to separate yourself from me, that the very thing you're worried about could suffer the most? You've been at my side for our entire clerical careers. Your support is what enabled me many times to make the tough decisions relating to the business end of the church. Do I close this school, or that school? Do I close this parish, or that one? I've leaned on you in countless ways to make the

right decisions that were best for God's people as well as the Universal Church. Now, out of some kind of misguided piety, you want to jeopardize what has to date been a winning combination – you and me together. Are you sure you want to do that William?"

"Brian, you're really pissed, aren't you? Calm down, I'm thinking of you in all of this. I don't want to see scandal attached to your Papacy because of me. That's my only thought in this matter – what is best for you and the church."

"I'll answer that question. What's best for me and the Church is you. You being right by my side now more than ever. Before we had a large Archdiocese to run. Now we have over one billion people that I am responsible for, not to mention all of the administrative stuff that goes along with that. There are hundreds of decisions made in this Apostolic Palace every day and your place is with me. William, I love you, I need you, and I can't do without you. Do you understand that? What could possibly make you think that if I needed you before, I would not need you now?"

"Yes Brian I do understand. If you're this certain about us and how we exist in this living monument to Catholicism, then fine. I certainly can't say that I am sorry you've decided this. I've loved you from day one in the seminary I think. Together, we have accomplished quite a bit and

we now have an even bigger opportunity than before to effect positive change. I'll move into the apartments but I want to discuss having sex a little more. Is that okay?"

"Yes, as long as you are close to me, I can discuss this other thing as much as you want. But I would be very unhappy if you were not to live in these apartments with me. We can explain that I work strange hours, often late into the night, and I'll require your services at odd times. It is a matter of convenience to have you close. I sleep later in the morning than previous popes because I work later than previous popes. After all, you have slept in all of the rectories and chancelleries that I have occupied as bishop and cardinal; why not pope? Besides, I just don't give a damn! Not only that, but it will place you under an even tighter security cloak and in fact protect me more as there will be someone actually within the apartments with me. Need I remind you that the last three popes all died within the apartment, and one was almost certainly murdered? Speaking of which, make sure you brief me on our Secret Service friend as soon as you get the full story."

"Of course. I will arrange to convert one of the studies into my bedroom. Is there anything else for the moment?"

"No. That will do it for now with the exception of notifying the prefecture for the pontifical

household that I wish to visit the Swiss Guard housing unit and speak to the men."

"I will take care of that. Is tomorrow okay?"

"Yes, that's fine. I want to talk to the American before meeting with the Swiss."

Chapter Six

A New Dawn

After dinner that night, the largest study was now William's bedroom. There were curious looks from some of the staff, but I was the pope now, so what were they going to do? Refuse to carry out my request? Not likely.

"Holy Father, may I speak with you?" William asked, self-conscious of the nuns.

"Of course. Come into my library."

As William closed the library door, he smiled at me and we sat down.

"Well, I was able to get a hold of Daniel Wright, formerly of the United States Secret Service. Once I managed to convince him that I was who I claimed to be, we had a good long talk. He left the Service because they found out he was gay. As you know, the president is very anti-gay and they moved Daniel off presidential protection details. He was transferred to counterfeiting

investigations, which he refused, as expected. He was then asked to leave. I found him personable with a good sense of humor and, best of all, he's available. He accepted your invitation to meet and will be on a plane tomorrow morning, his time. We can expect him no later than tomorrow evening. I'd have to say that I was quite pleased with our conversation."

"Excellent. I am very pleased that he is gay as I feel that my chief bodyguard should know this about me. He should also know who you are and what you mean to me. This means we can be just a little less on guard around him than anyone else that we might draw from Vatican Security. If he accepts the position, I will ask him to put together a small compact squad of men to take on the task of guarding me and you."

"I believe you will find him more than acceptable. Where shall I put him up while he is here for the interview? A hotel or here in the Vatican?"

"Find a suitable room for him here. He might as well get the feel of this old place if he is going to be living in the Apostolic Palace, and delay my visit with the Swiss Guard for another day." William laughed as a knock on the door interrupted us.

"Holy Father, is there anything else you or Monsignor Hart require before we retire for the

night?" the nun asked.

"Is there a pot of coffee on in the kitchen?"

"Always, as you have requested, Holy Father. It's on a timer and will shut off automatically at midnight unless you delay the time."

"Then my thanks to you and your sisters for your care today. May you sleep with the angels tonight."

"Thank you, Holy Father, and goodnight."

"Did you want to replace them with Christian brothers?" William asked after the sister had been gone for a minute.

"No, I see no reason at all for that. The sisters' lives are dedicated to the care of the pope and I don't want to take that from them. If information becomes known that they are not loyal, or were connected in anyway with the deaths of the previous popes, then we can replace them with whomever we like. I keep thinking of poor Albino Luciani being murdered here all alone. Someone on the inside did more than cooperate and no one is above suspicion, not even the nuns. His death led to the reign of John Paul the Second and all of its ultra-conservatism, which was continued by Dominic V. Someone deliberately changed the history of the Church not to mention the will of the Holy Spirit in the election of John Paul the First."

"Without question, and I doubt we will ever

know the truth unless we get a deathbed confession from the murderers or their accomplices."

"I won't count on it, but anything is possible with God. I know it's early, but it has been a very long day, and I wish to say night prayer and go to bed. Will you join me in chapel?"

"Of course."

After prayers, William checked to ensure that the doors to the papal apartments were locked after checking the rooms. After putting the document that designated Caliggio as Secretary of State into my inbox for signature, he retired, sleeping in his own bed this first night. We both slept remarkably well, a testament to how tired we were. At first light, I was awakened by a nun tapping on my shoulder.

"Holy Father, it's five a.m. Time to get up."

I shook my head, not believing my sleep-filled eyes. This was certainly not a sight I was used to seeing by any stretch of the imagination. Staring me in the face was a nun who looked just shy of one hundred years old, complete with rimless glasses and in full nun drag, and with a single hair sticking out from her chin. For a brief moment, I thought I was still sleeping and having a "Ghost of Christmas Past" experience. When my mind was able to focus on my present situation, I relaxed.

"Dear Sister, you may wake me in two hours,

and no sooner. Goodnight."

With that, I rolled over, vowing to have the locks changed on the damn front door to this palace of antiquity. I could see that more than just church policy on social issues needed changing around here. No wonder the previous popes were found dead at five in the morning; they were scared to death when they opened their eyes!

At precisely seven a.m., I was once again poked on the shoulder by a bony finger.

"Good morning, Holy Father. It's seven a.m."

"Thank you, Sister. I will be up in a moment."

As the ghostly vision in gray receded from the room, I threw off the covers, got out of bed, and headed to the bathroom to get ready for what I was sure was going to be a fun-filled day. Just after I stepped into the shower, William came into the bathroom, singing out good morning.

"Did you get up with the nuns or something? You sound positively alert and cheerful! It's disgusting!"

"Wow, did you get up on the wrong side of the pope bed or what?"

"No, I got up on the side the nuns poked me in at five this morning and again at seven."

"Oh dear, they must be used to normal pope hours instead of your hours. They don't know they elected a vampire to fill the chair of Peter, after all!"

As I opened the shower door, William handed me a towel and was just full of good-natured smiles.

"Notify the nuns that I will get up no earlier than seven o'clock unless something special is on the agenda. In addition, they are to go to you, and you will come to me. That nun this morning frightened me out of six years of life. No more nuns in the papal bedroom while the pope is sleeping, and change the damn locks on that outside door. If someone wants in, one of us is going to have to answer the door."

"Do you realize that when I checked outside the doors last night there was no guard present?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, no wonder it was so easy for them to kill John Paul the First. Contact the prefecture for the pontifical household and inform him that I want a guard station in the hallway directly across from these apartments, manned by two sentries. No one is to enter unless cleared by you or me. Make sure the sentries are the machine-gun-carrying type Swiss Guards, not those ones in the rainbow-colored pantaloons who carry spears!"

"Not spears, Brian: halberds! I can tell it's going to be one hell of a day; shame on them for waking you so early."

I got dressed in all white, what would now be my standard apparel. Now that I was the one

wearing the pontifical dress, I felt like a bride on her wedding day, every day.... No wonder some popes in the past wore red Prada shoes; it was so they could tell where their feet ended and the floor began!

I met William in my private dining room and found coffee, orange juice, and a bagel with cream cheese waiting for me. My standard breakfast even here in the palace. I was not a morning person and William was well aware of the fact. He rarely engaged me in any meaningful conversation until after I had at least two cups of coffee. This morning was no different.

"What does my schedule include today, Bill?"

"You have meetings with various heads of the different Vatican departments to review their history and determine whether to keep or replace them. Mass at noon, prayer and reflection in the early afternoon, evening prayer, dinner, a meeting with security, night prayer, and television time."

"You can meet with the department heads; I don't want to, nor should I have to. Whatever decisions you make are fine with me. Now, that makes lunch my first firm commitment for today. Please tell me that we can get something on television that isn't in Italian."

"I really don't know; I haven't turned on a television here yet. They are rare in the guest bedrooms, and I have no idea what programs they

get. I would imagine it is all Italian though."

"Well, then make sure we have an extensive DVD collection, or I will be bored to tears. How are the arrangements for my installation coming along?"

"Cardinal Caliggio is in charge of all that and, as far as I know, you will be installed in three days without any problem. Is there some special concern?"

"No, I just want to get that behind me so we can tackle my agenda. While you're in meetings this morning, I am going to Peter's Tomb and pray. I will need his faith and wisdom to make this all come together. After that, I will be in my office downstairs."

As I finished my coffee, the nuns came in to make up the bedrooms. That was my cue to leave to be with the dead. As I went out onto the third floor of the palace, I realized I wasn't sure how to get there from where I was. I headed down to what I supposed was a Swiss Guard station. As I approached, the guard came to attention. I knew the guards' rank by the insignias on their berets from my previous visits to the Vatican. As I approached the Sergeant of the Guard, he knelt down and greeted me.

"Good morning, Holy Father."

"Good morning, Sergeant. Would you do me the favor of having two of your men lead me to

the tombs below? I wish to visit St. Peter."

"Of course, Holy Father. I will personally escort you. Johansen, follow behind His Holiness."

A twenty-minute walk and I was standing before the first pope and apostle of Jesus with the guards about a hundred feet away waiting to escort me back. While I was in the crypt, they were closed off to all other persons so that I would remain undisturbed for my time with Peter. I always felt a sense of awe as I knelt at the tomb of St. Peter. History was clear on the matter of the authenticity of this final resting place of the apostle. I was always filled with wonderment that this man had met, talked, eaten with, and followed the son of God on Earth during the last three years of His life. Peter's ultimate martyrdom also reminded me of the price we are sometimes called upon to pay for our faith.

Before I left, I turned and stopped briefly at the tomb of Pope John Paul I, knelt and said a prayer for him. I would raise him to the status of Blessed within the year and eventually to Saint if the proper acclamations could be attributed to him. It was curious that the tomb of Pope John Paul I was nearest to St. Peter's tomb out of all the deceased Popes buried within the crypt. Was there an unintentional message in the placement of the last martyred pope with the first martyred pope? As I exited from the crypt, the Swiss Guard fell into

place and we passed a number of surprised clerics and visitors to the Vatican on the way back to my office. I surmised that people were not used to looking up and seeing the pope strolling among them. Well, a new sheriff was in town, and it would not be the only surprise they encountered from me.

My day passed swiftly as I was caught up in the myriad issues that occupy the pope. Before I knew it, it was time for dinner. As I left my office with William, a young priest came running after me to tell me that I had a visitor waiting at the first floor guard station.

"Holy Father, there is a Daniel Wright here to see you; he says he is expected by Your Holiness."

"That's correct."

"Where would you like to receive him?"

"Well, I'm sure he hasn't eaten. Bring him to my dining room and he can join me for dinner."

When I entered my apartment, I found the nuns and advised them we would have a guest for dinner tonight. They quickly set a third place. The good sisters knew I liked Italian food, and the lasagna on the menu put me in a great mood. I heard the outer door open, and went into the hallway to find William talking with an extremely good-looking man of about thirty-five: tall, lean, sandy-colored hair cut short in a military fashion,

blue eyes, and a superior body frame.

"It's an honor to meet you, Holy Father," he said, as he bent to kiss my ring.

"Thank you for making the very long journey to Rome. Will you join us for dinner? I'm sure you are hungry, with nothing but airplane food for the past few hours to satisfy you."

"Yes, I would be delighted."

"Excellent. Shall we eat then?"

William led the way and showed our guest where to sit. He waited until we were all at our places, and I said grace. I noticed Daniel made the sign of the cross on himself at the end, as was the custom, so he was Catholic as well as handsome. After the nuns served us and left the dining room, I began the conversation.

"Daniel, are you a man of faith?"

"Yes, Holy Father; in fact, I am Catholic. Although I have not been inside a church for more than ten years now, I have never lost my faith."

"Why have you ceased to attend church?"

"I disagree with some of the Church's positions on key social issues."

"What in particular, Daniel?"

"Holy Father, I would prefer to not answer as it might be considered rude of me to condemn Church policy while I am a guest in the Vatican."

"Nonsense. I am American also, remember? I believe in freedom of speech, so speak up!"

"Very well, sir. I am utterly against the Church's stands on gay people, birth control, and a woman's right to choose."

William's eyebrow went up on hearing that abortion was a problem for Daniel.

"Since you are against Church policy on gays, and you left the Secret Service over this same issue, may I assume that you are gay?"

Daniel put his fork down, looked me straight in the eyes, and replied, "Yes, Pope John, I am a gay man. And further, it is God in heaven who determined that I would be born gay, and therefore I am proud of what God saw fit to make me in this life."

I was so moved by his honest, faith-filled response that I put down my fork, got up and went around to him. When he stood, I hugged him.

"God bless you, my son, for you have accepted the Will of the Father, which many people cannot do under any circumstances. In fact, I agree with you totally. The Church is wrong on this score. Now please sit down and eat."

I returned to my place and sat with tears in my eyes.

"Holy Father, you agree with me? Then how can the Church, how can you, continue to oppress that which God has made?"

"Daniel, the earth shall soon shake with an

edict I will issue. I cannot say more than that for now. We can discuss your other issues another time. How would you feel about handling my personal security apart and separate from the Vatican general security? I would want you to recruit at least six men, American or British, which would be my core security. You would be plainclothes and act exactly as the Secret Service does. You would have the authority to overrule Vatican Security on issues related to my personal security. Does this interest you?"

"I am stunned, Holy Father, especially in light of your knowledge that I am gay. But to answer your question, yes, I would be honored to be responsible for your life."

"And the life of soon-to-be Bishop Hart, who is my private secretary and very dear to me. We will both be in some danger once I make my planned changes and you will have a large job on your hands. You will live in the Vatican, carry a Vatican diplomatic passport, and have open access to me or any member of my staff. Your salary will be seventy-five thousand dollars a year to begin, and will include full benefits. You will be fed as well as housed here. The first thing I would ask you to do is read about the death of Pope John Paul the First. It is my belief and the belief of many others that the Holy Father was murdered before he could make the same changes that I intend to make. In

addition, something stinks about the death of Pope Paul the Sixth. Study that death also. If they've killed already, they might try it again, although I am keeping my plans secret until it's too late to do anything about them."

We finished dinner and went into my study, where coffee was served.

"When can you start, Daniel?" asked William.

"When do you intend to announce these changes?"

"The day after my official installation. Once that happens, I will sign the documents in front of the College of Cardinals and propagate the changes."

"In that case, Holy Father, I'd better go back to America in the morning, and return before you issue the orders. I also need to contact a couple of guys I can think of right off, to ask if they will join me on this detail. What would be their compensation?"

"William will discuss all of that with you, as I am headed to night prayer. However, I agree: you should be here no later than the day I make history in this Church. When you return, suitable quarters will await you. Tonight, you are in a guest room, but when you take up your duties you will be housed in the Apostolic Palace so you will be nearby."

"When you return, you will be authorized to

draw a weapon from the Swiss Guard Armory, and whatever else you need," advised William.

I stood up and shook Daniel's hand. "Welcome to the family and household of the Vicar of Christ on Earth."

He kissed my ring, and I left him with William. I decided to say the Divine Office for night prayer in the Sistine Chapel since it was closed now. As I went out into the hallway, I found a new guard station, as I had ordered. The sentries came to attention with their sergeant kneeling and asked if they could assist me.

"I am going to the Sistine Chapel for prayer. Would one of you escort me?"

I traveled to the most famous chapel in the world and knelt in prayer with the Swiss Guard on duty. An hour later, I was back in my quarters, and found William waiting on me.

"Did your talk with Daniel end well?"

"Yes, and he has gone to bed. He is very enthusiastic about the job. I believe we have made the best choice possible and you will be far more secure under his watchful eyes."

"Good. And he certainly is easy on the eyes, is he not?"

"Without question, he will make a stunning addition to your personal staff," William said with a smile. "I'll have to keep an eye on you when he's around. Brian, can we continue our discussion

about our lives here?"

"Of course William. Let's go into the living room and sit down. Would you get us a couple of sodas?"

As I waited for William to come back, I recalled our previous discussion and how it had ended. I found the topic to be stressing to say the least. Would this conversation also end that way?

"Here you go, I put a lot of ice in your glass. So, shall I start?"

"By all means. William, this is mainly your issue and it's up to you and I to settle this once and for all so that we can have peace in our personal life together. As I recall, you were questioning the issue of our continuing to have sex, is that right?"

"Yes. As I stated before, you are the Church now. You represent all of its policies and practices. Even though we have never followed it, celibacy is the law of the land when it comes to Roman Catholic Clergy. Somehow I don't feel right thinking about you in a sexual way anymore. Is that wrong of me?"

"Wrong? No. However, I ask you again how it is that you were alright with our ignoring the issue before I became Pope, but now you wish to adhere to it? What specifically aside from my new role in the life of the church is different?"

"This place we now live in. We don't just live in

a residence anymore somewhere in the United States, we now live in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican. When I think of those who came before you, and the history contained within these walls, I feel a little intimidated.”

“Intimidated? Are you serious? As I said the last time we discussed this, my predecessors were far from pious angels. Do you need to read again the history of the popes down through the centuries to understand that we are in fact angels compared to some of them? William, we love each other and share that love by expressing it through the gift of sexuality. Previous popes had concubines, both male and female, fathered children out of wedlock, and on and on! We might not be saints William, but we are I dare say a damn sight better than some who have come before us.”

“Yes, I know there have been others who have fallen far short of the ideal of what God has wanted for His Vicar on earth, but does that necessarily mean that we shouldn’t strive to be the best we can be? Shouldn’t you and I be better than those who have come before you? Why shouldn’t you as Pope, be better than those buried below? Why can’t we pursue perfection in the Holy Office you now hold?”

“And how exactly would our denying ourselves sexual union make us better for the

church?"

"Well, both of us would remain more pure than not."

"Pure? Ah, I get it. The catholic sense of guilt over the 'dirty act of sex.' Yes, we've all had it pounded into us by the sexually starved servants of the church since childhood that sex is dirty and not to be enjoyed but is fit only for procreation. Is that it? Well, bullshit! God provided us a way to express ourselves in an intimate way that conveys our emotional commitment to the person we love. The church has done more harm than can be imagined in this area. Yes, sexual responsibility must be observed so that we don't abuse this gift, but to not use it because you fear it's dirty? Nonsense. If that were the case, once women passed the age of child bearing, their sexual appetites would vanish as well as men upon reaching the age of twenty five. Why do men reach their sexual peak in their late teens, early twenties, and women around the age of forty, if sex is only meant for procreation? It's because sex can be enjoyed for both pleasure as well as reproduction. For gay men, it's more than sex, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," William said with a frown.

"I mean that it isn't only that we are drawn to have sex with our own gender, but it is who we can fall in love with, isn't it? We fall in love with

members of our own sex. It's my belief that we are somehow part of the natural way to control the birth rate on planet earth. If that is the reason for God having created homosexuals, He could have just left it at that. But He didn't. The Lord didn't want us gay people to go through our lives without knowing the richness of love and sexual intimacy that heterosexual people know. He gave us the capability to fall in love with another male so that our lives would not be spent in loneliness. Many gay couples are like us; we were young together and we are growing old together, keeping each other in love and caring. That's the part the right wing of the church forgets. It isn't all about sex, it's also about love. Why should we forego the physical pleasures of our love? The very act of making love is a gift freely given to humankind so that we might delve further into the realm of intimacy and oneness. When we witness the bonds of marriage, we are blessing two people as they become one in the spirit and flesh. For the time being, gay people cannot marry, but that does not prevent us from becoming one just as other couples do. If you remove the physical act from the emotional state, gays may never reach total fulfillment.

This doesn't mean that two people can't love each other without the sexual act, but it does mean purposely rejecting the gift of sexuality. Is it God

who demands that we reject our sexuality? Did Jesus state anything about the natural state of gay people? My God, they didn't even know what a gay person was in biblical times. They knew of temple prostitutes who engaged in lustful sex that was against their nature. Heterosexual men acting out against their nature sexually merely for the purpose of lust and public display. That isn't the case with us or with most gay couples. We act out sexually according to the nature we were born with. St. Thomas Aquinas explained this in his *Summa Theologica* when he was talking about the nature of man when he said: 'For the sheep, seeing the wolf, judges it a thing to be shunned, from a natural and not a free judgment, because it judges, not from reason, but from natural instinct.' This applies to gays also. We are attracted to our own sex by natural instinct and not because we were taught it some how. You know all of this and yet you are attempting to build a wall around our sexuality. Think about it, and we can talk more another time if that's alright with you."

"I see your point Brian and I will think on it. I'm sorry for having loaded this onto us along with trying to adjust to your election."

"Never be sorry for expressing your feelings or beliefs on any subject. You know I respect and value you for your opinions and intellect!"

William got up and threw his arms around me

and hugged me, whispering, "I love you."

"I love you also my dear, and always will. Do you want to sleep with me tonight? It's safe, after all, since the poking nuns can't get at me anymore."

"Yes, I would like that. It has been too long since I felt your body beside me. I'll turn out the lights and lock the door. By the way, I'm having a doorbell installed outside the main door."

"Good idea. I'm going to bed now. Join me when you wish. I'm tired tonight for some reason."

It wasn't too much longer before I felt Bill climb into bed and snuggle up against my back. He put his arm around me and whispered, "I think we should do this every night, Brian, whether or not we make love. I love you."

"And I love you, Bill. Goodnight." As we drifted off to sleep, I ran all of our conversations through my head that William and I had engaged in. There really was only one option that I could take.

Chapter Seven

Pope For A Day

It was the morning of my formal installation as pope, and the day before the Church would shake. I met William in the dining room for our usual breakfast and felt butterflies in my stomach, even though I had been in similar situations before as bishop and eventually as cardinal. Maybe because the entire world was watching once more, I was a bit nervous. As I bit into my bagel, the recently installed doorbell rang. A nun went to answer it.

"Holy Father, there is a Daniel Wright asking to see you."

"Wonderful, Sister. Show him in, please."

In walked Daniel, fresh off the plane with a broad smile on his face. "Good morning, Holy Father, Monsignor," he said with a nod.

I rose, shook Daniel's hand, and hugged him. "This is a surprise; I didn't expect you until

tomorrow.”

“I thought I would get here for today’s event as well. I also brought three men, all Americans, for your approval.”

“You didn’t waste any time, did you?”

“No, Holy Father, and the men jumped at the chance to protect you. They are all former Secret Service or FBI, and I have a Special Forces soldier I am considering.”

“William, have the arrangements been made so that Daniel here can arm himself?”

“Yes. If it is all right with you, I will take care of that now.”

“By all means, and have him shown to his permanent quarters. As for the other men, check them out and see what you think. Daniel, are they here to stay if hired?”

“Yes, sir. They came with suitcases.”

“William, see to their armory needs as well once you bless their hiring.”

“Of course. Let me take you to the guard now, Daniel, and they will take you to their armory.”

Once they left, I sat back down and felt happy that this part of my plan was coming together so smoothly. *As long as the Swiss don’t get their noses bent out of shape, things will be fine*, I thought. I had to be mindful of the proud history of the Swiss Guard and the sacrifices they have made over the centuries in protecting the pope. I also knew,

however, that the Swiss Guard and the United States Secret Service had a long tradition of working closely together in all things papal.

I noticed that the time was moving quickly and my installation was scheduled in a little over three hours from now. I finished my breakfast, returned to my bedroom, and put on the remainder of my papal regalia. Today I would receive my personalized Ring of the Fisherman. This ring was traditionally made by the jewelers of Rome as a gift to the new pontiff. It had my name in Latin surrounding the symbol of the fisherman and I understood from those who had seen it that it was beautiful. William returned to the apartments and advised me that the Swiss Guard were hesitant to issue a firearm to Daniel. William thought he detected a turf war brewing.

"Set up a meeting with the commandant of the guard for this afternoon. I will deal with this immediately. I do not want hurt feelings over my decision. Did you meet the other men?"

"Yes. I like what I see, but I want to review their records before agreeing to their addition to the household."

"Very well. As I said, this is in your hands. I want Daniel to be nearby during my installation today. Everyone might as well begin to get used to seeing him near me."

William answered the telephone and told me

that the commandant of the guard was on asking to speak with me. I told William to make an appointment with him this afternoon.

"What was that about, like I don't already have an idea?"

"I think the commandant is anxious about having a total stranger near you with a gun. He is guessing that Daniel is some sort of bodyguard, but wants to discuss it with you. He will be happy to meet with you at three forty-five this afternoon in your office on the second floor."

"Good. Wait until he finds out that there will be another five or so men in addition to Daniel. That should really make him happy! Now, let's go over the ceremony of installation one more time. You know I hate public embarrassment, and I can't think of a more public situation than this."

When we had finished the review for the final time, I said, "God, it's like that old television program *Queen for a Day*. Well, who am I to argue with tradition. I can't rock the Church too much or it will splinter. It looks like about two hours. Is that about right?"

"Yes, we start out at St. Peter's Tomb and process from there."

"Ah, the poor man doesn't get any rest, does he?"

The time had arrived and the cardinals and I

gathered in the tombs before St. Peter's remains. Above us, the crowds were massed, the outdoor altar was set up, and many of the world's leaders were in attendance. At the precise moment it was all to begin, the Master of Ceremony approached me and nodded my signal to begin with the required words:

"I leave from where the apostle arrived."

From there, we processed out into St. Peter's Square to the roaring approval of the masses. It was a beautiful spring day, with a brilliant blue sky, warm breeze, the air alive with the smell of incense from the Thurifer, who was at the forefront of the procession. There was no hostility at an American being installed in the Vatican. Beneath the contempt that George Bush had generated around the world when he was president, one could still find genuine love and enthusiasm for America and its citizens. The idea of an American pope was something that many had to adjust to, but I was their pope, and for many that erased national boundaries.

The cardinals took their places and I took mine after kissing the altar. As I looked to my left in the VIP section, I noted at least seven heads of state, two kings, and various prime ministers. The square was full and the day was perfect, as God had designed.

"Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever unto ages of ages," sang the Russian Orthodox Archbishop from Moscow. And so the Great Litany began and the Mass was well underway. With the Masters of Ceremonies doing their jobs efficiently, everything went like clockwork. At the proper time, I was vested with the pallium, made from the wool of lambs raised by Trappist monks to represent my role as a shepherd. The final symbol given to me was the Ring of the Fisherman, the gold ring with the seal of the pontiff engraved on the face. The ring was no longer used to seal documents, but the ring continued to denote the office of the Vicar of Christ on Earth. There was now a separate Official Seal of the Pope, kept secure in the papal office.

I was now officially installed as the two hundred and sixty-seventh Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the twenty-fourth pope to have chosen the name of the apostle John. There was a short line of twelve cardinals representing the original twelve apostles, who pledged their fealty by kneeling before me and kissing my newly acquired ring.

Cardinal Caliggio delivered the homily of the Mass. It ended with requests for the faithful to keep me in their daily prayers, which I surely needed. Before I knew it, it was communion time, and an army of priests spread out to give

communion. I gave communion to the altar servers and the heads of state that sat but a few feet away. Communion took well over twenty minutes even with the number of clergy on hand. The final act of the Mass was the papal blessing given to the City of Rome and to the world, or the *Urbi et Orbi*, which was given on special days such as Christmas, Easter, and papal installations.

"Et benedictio Dei omnipotentis, Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti descendat super vos et maneat semper," I said while making the sign of the cross over the people three times.

The Mass ended and then began the procession from the square. As I left, I gave the sign of the cross over the masses as we moved into the Basilica of St. Peter. I was warm underneath all of the vestments, and frankly could not wait to take them off so that I could cool down a bit. William was at my side and made sure that we went into the Basilica sacristy as quickly as possible. There I was assisted in removing everything but the traditional white cassock.

William, Cardinal Caliggio, and I headed to lunch in my apartment. I hated the heat or any humidity and requested the air-conditioning be turned on. The nuns had put together a fine Italian lunch for us and I ate heartily. As we finished, the doorbell rang and the nuns asked if I wished to be

disturbed by a Daniel Wright. I asked them to have him come in.

"Excuse me, Holy Father; I did not know you were eating."

"That's all right. Let me get a soda and we can talk in my library. Would you like one?"

"No, sir. I'm fine."

After we sat down in my library, I realized that I had not seen Daniel anywhere during the Mass. "Daniel, were you not at the Mass?"

"Yes, Holy Father, I was. And the fact that you did not see me is because I realized the best place for me was directly behind your chair. I would have rather been up in the logia over the main entrance to the Basilica but I can't be in two places at once. When I have a full staff, things will be properly covered."

"I see. Very well. Have you eaten?"

"I usually only eat twice a day; it helps me stay in shape."

William came into the library after showing the Secretary of State out of the apartment. He took a seat opposite me and smiled.

"Have you made any decisions on the men that Daniel has selected?" I asked William.

"Yes, Holy Father. I see no reason not to take them on as members of the papal household. That can be effective now, Daniel."

"Excellent, Monsignor. I have a lot of work to

do getting my men settled in and updated on the apostolic palace and the Vatican."

"By the way, Daniel, when I travel, I will want you and at least two of your men with us."

"Of course, Holy Father."

"I'm going to be meeting with the commandant of the Swiss Guard in an hour and you and your men are the topic of conversation. Let me restate to you that your job is to protect me and William. Let the Swiss Guard take care of all other security functions. Unless it concerns my safety, you are not to interfere with them. I don't want a revolution on my hands with a five hundred-year-old institution."

"I understand, Holy Father. I will also be sensitive to the situation at all times as will my men."

"Good. Now get your men settled into their quarters, and arrange for the things that you will need daily. William has asked Father Milton to meet with you and go over all those details. I hope everyone will be comfortable here at the Vatican."

Daniel rose and left to tend to his men. I had a good feeling that he would work out just fine. The relaxing hour passed, and I headed down to my office on the second floor to meet with Colonel Swenson of the guard. William introduced us.

"Commandant, it is good to meet you; please sit down," I said after he had kissed my ring. "I have

decided to bring in a very small security detail that will act as my personal bodyguards. The agent in charge, you have met; Daniel Wright. He will have five men working for him and their duties are strictly personal to me in nature. They are part of the pontifical household as of today. They will be armed and will have total access to any place that they need to get into. At least three of them will accompany me on foreign and local trips. They are all former U.S. Secret Service or FBI. I stress to you, Commandant, that this is in no way a negative reflection on your men or their abilities. I treasure the service that is rendered to me and the Church by your unit. I wish you would look at them as assisting you in your duties and responsibilities here in the Vatican. Neither you nor any of your men will have to answer to them in any way. They are solely responsible to me."

"I see, Holy Father. Was there a particular reason that you feel it's necessary to have an additional security force to the Swiss Guard?"

"It is merely extra precaution on our part. I expect that some of my decisions will not be popular. As such, it is prudent of me to create this small squad of men for the sake of stability within the Church. For example, I have created a guard station outside my apartment. No one will be able to walk in unannounced. I rely on you and your

men for this protection. Agent Wright and his men will have access to me any time of the day or night. I will also ask that your organization share any intelligence that you receive immediately with Agent Wright or his designated agent should he not be here, and he will do likewise with you. This has no negative impact on your unit and I hope I can count on your cooperation."

"Yes, of course, Holy Father. I will let the men know of this new unit at once."

"Thank you, Commandant, for your understanding and cooperation. Feel free to contact Monsignor Hart any time you have a question."

With that, the meeting was over and I sat back in my chair, relieved that the situation was not going to turn into some kind of drama. As I was chatting with William, the cardinal in charge of administrative matters within the Vatican asked to see me.

Chapter Eight

I've Got A Secret

“Holy Father, something rather odd has occurred. The staff was cleaning out an old desk used by the papal secretary to Pope Paul the Sixth and found an envelope that is still sealed, addressed merely to: For my successor to the Chair of Peter. I have not opened it of course,” he said as he handed the envelope to me. As I looked at the envelope, I saw the official seal of Pope Paul VI was unbroken. It was as described and showed some hints of its age.

“Thank you, Eminence, I will look into this. I’m sure it’s just best wishes for the next pope, although John Paul the First surely needed more than wishes.”

As the cardinal left, I looked at William and said, “Well, this is odd. Shall we open it?”

“By all means. It’s probably just a recipe for meat sauce and pasta,” William answered with a

laugh. I slit the envelope with a letter opener and pulled out the contents. Within, I found six pages in very small script by the hand of Paul VI himself. When I finished reading the contents, I dropped the pages on the desk and looked at my friend and lover with astonishment and shock. William saw my reaction, but he waited to speak until I gathered my wits about me.

"William, I want you to personally type out the contents of this missive. Print one copy, and password-protect the file on your computer."

"Of course, but what the hell does it say?"

"Hell indeed!" I then gave William the condensed version of the letter quietly so that no one would overhear. "Basically, Paul believed that he would die soon after writing this document, and in fact, it is dated two weeks before his death. In it, he warns the new pope that during the end of his papacy, Satan entered the Vatican and was seated on the papal throne by members of the Curia. He alleges that some cardinals and bishops were protecting the devil from the Church exorcist like an animal on a game preserve. He opens the letter by saying 'the smoke of Satan has entered the Vatican.' He further alleges that in some bishops' houses in the United States and Europe, satanic rituals are practiced. He warns that any attempt to perform an exorcism would result in war between the fallen angel and the Church, a

war he says that Satan will win. He further states that instead of innocent human sacrifices as required in ancient rites that worship the fallen one, that sexual intercourse with male children between the ages of nine and twelve has been substituted. Finally, he alleges that a simultaneous act of installment and worship took place in a cathedral in South Carolina at the exact moment that he was seated here in St. Peter's. This somehow ties in the American Church with the extinction of the Church. And one might ask who sits in the chair of Peter today? An American. Something that was never supposed to happen!"

"You don't believe any of this. Do you, Brian? I mean, it's preposterous. Paul was obviously very ill and delusional at the end of his life."

"I don't know. It's rather strange that this letter went unobserved all these years. Paul also says that you can feel the evil presence in the Basilica if you go there at midnight. Just look at all the problems the Church has had since the nineteen sixties. It's been one scandal after another. Financial misdeeds, the murder of at least one pope, the sex abuse scandals, and all the hatred that has come out of these buildings over the past thirty years, especially toward the gay community. I want you to quietly get with the Vatican Archivist and see what you can dig up from this time. In addition, find the location of the

throne that was in St. Peter's during Paul's reign. If it's still in the Basilica, get it out of there; in fact, have it destroyed. Additionally, have John Paul the Second's records searched for any mention of evidence that something was wrong in the Basilica."

"Are you serious? You are giving credibility to the ravings of a dying man? You are too smart to believe in old wives' tales from fifty years ago!"

"The very minority that has been persecuted by the Vatican since before John Paul the Second is now sitting in the Chair of Peter. Coincidence or destiny? I'm not saying that I believe this, but I want more information. Type up the letter and put a copy along with the original in my safe in the apartment. Get information, if any exists, that might corroborate what Paul has written. If there is any truth to this, then we must act accordingly. And find the current official exorcist, and determine if he is the best we have."

As if I didn't have enough to worry about already, I now had to worry about the devil running around in St. Peter's at night! I suddenly felt the urge to pray and went to my chapel to engage God Almighty, for it would be He who would battle the fallen one; even if I was used as the conduit.

At dinnertime, William joined me in our dining

room, and it was just the two of us. After waiting for the nuns to leave, we began to talk. "Tomorrow I address the cardinals on the subject of gays in the Church and *Humanae Vitae*. It could be a wild day; are you prepared for it?"

"I have both the documents ready for you to sign, and your notes for the speech to the Curia. In light of what was revealed to us today, are you sure you wish to go forward?"

"What has one to do with the other, William?"

"Well, Paul's letter seems to make a connection between Satan and the molestation of little boys. If this letter gets out, and they view your edict on gays in the Church, they are going to say you are being influenced by Satan on this issue, and since your second edict has to do with birth control, they will once again point to it as an indicator that you are under the control of dark forces."

"These changes were planned well before Paul's letter was found today. Speaking of which, have you been able to find out anything regarding the matters I asked you to look into?"

"Yes, but you are not going to be happy. First, the chair used by Paul as the throne has long since been removed from St. Peter's, but is in storage in an undisclosed location. Second, we did find something ominous in the private notes of John Paul the Second that speaks to this issue. He writes that he became aware shortly after he

became pope of an *irremovable presence of a malign strength* in his own Vatican and in certain bishops' chanceries in Europe and the United States, which he attributes to something called the *superforce*. Although, according to his notes, when research was done on this unseen force, it was determined to have come on scene at the installation of Paul in nineteen sixty-three and not at the end of his papacy. John Paul the Second further states that he believes from information his staff gathered that on the night of the installation of Paul, satanic pedophilia was carried out in Turin, Italy, and South Carolina. Exorcists consider this the culmination of the fallen archangels' rites. He even gives a date, June twenty-ninth, nineteen sixty-three, which is one week after the installation of Paul as pope, but the night that Paul celebrated Mass at St. John Lateran in Rome and thus took possession of his official cathedral."

"Who is the current exorcist?"

"It was Monsignor Wilhelm but he died two months ago, and Dominic was too ill to replace him. You are going to have to appoint a new exorcist and I have taken the liberty of drawing up a list of those that meet the criteria."

"Please, remind me what those criteria are; I'm a little off on exorcists since we have never had a call for one before."

"The basic requirements are that he be a priest,

one who is expressly and particularly authorized by the ordinary. When he intends to perform an exorcism over persons tormented by the devil, he must be properly distinguished for his piety, prudence, and integrity of life. He should fulfill this devout undertaking in all constancy and humility, being immune to any striving for human aggrandizement, and relying, not on his own power, but on the power divine. Moreover, he ought to be of mature years, and revered not alone for his office but for his moral qualities. He should have studied more in this particular area of ministry than is normally required. This applies to an exorcist of people or space."

"And of the list you have prepared, are any in the Vatican?"

"There is one who fits the requirements, a couple more in Europe, and three in America."

"Who is the priest in the Vatican?"

"A French Benedictine named Father Marcel Claremont. He is sixty-seven and came to the Vatican several years ago after a full ministry of fieldwork in parishes and education. His job here is in the history department of the Vatican archives."

"I want to see him first thing in the morning with you present. Should we inform Daniel Wright about any of this?"

"I would hold off a bit if you can; it might be

too much for him at once. Besides, you don't plan on going over to St. Peter's at midnight, do you?" William asked with a smile.

"Not unless God Himself comes down here and orders me to! If the devil truly is in the Basilica, I need to be prepared spiritually before I attempt to do anything. The summer break at Castile Gandolfo might be the perfect time to have action on this issue."

The doorbell rang and scared both of us like a pair of schoolgirls frightened by campfire ghost stories. We both laughed as one of the sisters came in with Daniel.

"Good evening, Holy Father, Monsignor."

"Hello, Daniel. How are you?"

"Fine, Holy Father. I just wanted to check to see if there is anything else before I go off duty, and to give you this."

Daniel handed me a device that looked like a garage door opener with a button on it. I looked up at Daniel and he told me it was a duress device. If there was a problem, I was to push it and either he or the duty agent would come running. Daniel had a key to the apartment and would be able to gain entrance in case of an alarm.

"Very good, Daniel. Thank you. As for tonight, I don't plan to leave the apartment. If I do, I will call you."

"Very well, Holy Father. Then I shall say

goodnight until tomorrow."

"Well, William, I'm going to go over the notes for tomorrow's bombshell of a meeting with the Curia, and ready myself for what is to come. I will be watching television later if you want to join me, and then we can go to bed. I'm going to need your support both tonight and tomorrow."

"If I could say one thing Brian before the evening passes?"

"Yes, of course, what is it?"

"I've made a decision that I wish to share with you."

"Oh, I'm not sure I like the way you said that. Out with it, what is it?"

"I don't feel we should have sex again until after you repeal the rule of celibacy for all clergy. Then we would be free to make love and I wouldn't feel like I do now about it. I believe every word that you said to me regarding our nature and what is natural for us in accordance with our nature and it is this reason that moves me to make this decision."

I shook my head and sighed. "You've decided this, huh? You came to this decision even after our discussion about the previous popes and talking about what we mean to each other, as well as everything else I said?"

"Yes Brian. I feel that we would be hypocrites compared to all those clerics who do follow the

rule because the church says too. Why are we any better than the lowly nun, or brother in some monastery? Please try and understand how I feel. We are men of honor and have long lived with this one exception to what is required of us. We can't ignore it any longer. Brian, you are Pope, change the rule. If you truly believe what you said when quoting St. Thomas, then there is only one action you can take to honor the nature of our sexuality. Repeal clerical celibacy! Help me to be able to make love to you again with a clear conscience. Let us not stand for hypocrisy and entitlement."

"Okay, I do understand your position. Consider clerical celibacy on the chopping block sooner than later. I had already planned to do something about this rule, but you are forcing me to address the issue considerably sooner than I had anticipated. So, no sex till it's repealed, huh?"

"I'm afraid so. I love you so much for understanding why this is so important to me. Thank you for this gift."

"Alright, enough of this now. I take it the no sex rule does not preclude you from sharing my bed for the common good of warmth?"

"No my love, we can share our bed."

"Than all and all, I'm a happy man."

Chapter Nine

Ain't We Got Fun?

I rose at seven to the smile of my dear friend and lover, who had gotten up earlier and who once again tried to talk my ears off while I showered. I swear the steam loosened his tongue, as it was never quiet when I took a shower. His transformation from cultured, sophisticated companion to chatty Kathy never ceased to amaze me.

I dressed and we went into breakfast, as William continued to talk nonstop. I shot him my look for “Would you shut the hell up for a few minutes?” It worked, as always, and I was able to enjoy my breakfast with a little peace. This was especially important today, as I had a full schedule of things that would rock the boat in Italy.

When I started my second cup of coffee, I gave William the look for him to resume his chatter. He wanted to make sure that I had enough prep time

for the Curia meeting this morning, but I didn't have any questions. As I finished my coffee, Daniel arrived to escort us to the meeting that was being held in a large conference room in the Apostolic Palace. I advised Daniel of what was going to transpire shortly and told him that many people would not be happy over my decisions. As we left the apartment, I was escorted by two Swiss Guards, two of my agents, and Daniel. We arrived two minutes late for the meeting after stopping to talk to a bishop that I knew from America.

Cardinals rose and bowed their heads as I took my seat in the papal chair at the front of the room. William stood behind me and Daniel and his men flanked my position. As I looked over the room, I could tell that approximately one hundred and forty-seven cardinals attended. It was easy for the pope to make an accurate guess by the way the seats were laid out. You simply had to subtract the number of empty seats from the total number of cardinals, and you had your answer. After everyone had settled down, William brought out a tall antique writing table so that I could sign documents without stretching. On the table were the papal edicts that I would sign. I was ready to begin and William bent the microphone down so that it was directly in front of my face.

"Good morning, Eminences. It is good to see all of you again. I am sorry that I have kept you in

Rome slightly longer than custom dictates. I have asked you to be present this morning as I am making Church history, changing the path we tread on two key issues. The first papal bull I issue is a repeal of the encyclical of *Humanae Vitae* promulgated by Pope Paul the Sixth. The issue of birth control is now a matter of conscience for the faithful, and no longer an edict prohibiting the same. It has been said that to interfere with the cycle of birth is to deny the connection between marriage and God. It is looked upon as a sin. I say to you, my brothers, that the real sin is to birth children that cannot be fed, educated, or cared for properly, children who ultimately starve to death or are murdered. How can we in this day of overpopulation tell the good people of the African continent and Asia that they must have children every time they enjoy marital relations? How can this be pleasing to God when we are the nexus between much suffering and church law? We can no longer, in good conscience, impose upon these people the restrictions endured under this encyclical. It is a matter of medical knowledge that condoms assist greatly in preventing the spread of the scourge of HIV and other diseases. How can we condone the spread of a disease so ferocious because we will not allow the faithful to use contraception?"

There was a great murmuring among the

cardinals as they looked at one another, shaking their heads. Worried looks were exchanged between Cardinal Caliggio and other senior cardinals.

"I am also reminded that one of my predecessors of blessed memory, John Paul the First, fully intended to take this action but was extinguished before he could do so. I now complete his intention by the signing of the bull."

I took a pen and signed the bull in front of the college. I looked into the faces of my cardinals and I could tell that many were pleased at this change in the law of the Church; those belonging to the liberal branch, which no longer existed but whose tenets still lived on in some cardinals. I then took the papal seal and placed it on the document before me.

"This bull will be promulgated throughout the world by the Vatican news service. I direct each of you to see that the bishops under your direction and in the nations you serve are aware of this new policy and that the faithful are notified as soon as possible.

Now as to the second bull I am issuing today: As of this date, the policy and letters of this Church as regarding the gay community of the world shall reflect a new theology. No longer will the members of the gay community be shunned by the Church. No longer will the Church interfere in

their host nations when civil authorities attempt to pass legislation to grant gay people equal rights under the law. It is clear in Church history and scripture that there has never been a legitimate prohibition on what we understand today as the gay community.

Further, I direct that the Church shall encourage the equal treatment of gay people in all aspects of life, including the right to marriage or a similar state as determined by the civil authorities. Eminences, we know that the original scriptures have been changed throughout history to reflect the changing prejudices of society and we know these errors were promulgated by well-intentioned monks who copied the scriptures.

St. Paul could not have the slightest understanding that we do today of human sexuality and the role that genetics play in this vital part of the human spirit. Lord have mercy on us, o God, for the harm we have done to your homosexual children in your name.

I direct that Churches in communion with the Holy See and those who wish to be friends to the chair of Peter open up their buildings so that the gay community might worship the One God, the Triune God. Further, an active outreach must begin in the gay community to bring them back to the Church and the love of God.

Openly gay men and women will be permitted

to apply to the seminary in a diocese or to a religious order for admission, and if they meet all other requirements, they will be ordained into major orders. We must be understanding, take a new look at this topic, and realize that God in His infinite wisdom has built into humankind a natural method of birth control without the use of contraception.

Homosexuals fall in love just as heterosexuals and choose a mate for life. It is this choosing of a mate that must be encouraged by the Church. Their sexuality should be expressed within a relationship just as it is with heterosexual couples. We must do our best to encourage the love that can exist between people who are born gay. I hereby sign this papal bull and order it promulgated today by the same methods as the repeal of *Humanae Vitae*."

As I took pen in hand and signed the bull, I heard open whispers and objections to this new policy of the Church. I sealed the document firmly, put both bulls into a folder, and handed them to William.

"Holy Father, this is outrageous; we can't do this! It goes against centuries of the teachings of the Church and the Holy Scripture itself. Please reconsider at once!" yelled a cardinal from Africa. His voice was joined by at least fifty or sixty others.

"First of all, Eminence, I can do anything I wish regarding Church policy or law. You elected me pope and gave me that power and I chose to exercise it and bring peace to a substantial sector of the world population that has been isolated from the Church and the love of God for all too long. Don't tell me I can't do something like this, because of course, I can, and furthermore it is done!

Remember, this very Church gave birth to such hatred as the Inquisition, which every one of you should disavow without question. Was that the love of God? No! Is driving the children of the Lord from His house right? No! We have blood on our hands for many of the actions of our predecessors and it is time to correct what we can. What was the great sin of Sodom? Was it homosexuality? No! It was inhospitality and, by rights, the Lord should destroy this Church for committing the same sin. The Church doors are now open to all! If there be any among you who cannot carry out this new policy, then come forward now and lay your ring on this desk. I will replace you within the week."

Four cardinals came forward and resigned; three from Africa, and one from South America. No one else moved. Shocked looks remained on the faces of all but a few.

"I hereby accept these resignations and direct

the papal secretary to make the proper notifications today of this decision. I might add once again, this is an action that was anticipated by Pope John Paul the first, before he was apparently murdered in his bed!"

Everyone began to talk at once, protesting the assertion that John Paul I was murdered. However, I caught a few shouts of "It's about time that was acknowledged!"

"May I continue, Eminences?" After another minute, the room became quiet once again. "I am not issuing any changes on this today, but I want twelve cardinals to form a committee to study ways in which we can eliminate the requirement of priestly celibacy. This study will include the effect it would have on Church property, living arrangements, salary, and training. If we can incardinate married Episcopal priests into the clergy, then why can't celibacy be an optional vow? I direct Cardinal Redfield of the Congregation for the Clergy to take the lead on this and chair the committee. Please issue a report to me in six months. This will be voted on by the Synod of Bishops and I will consider the final vote when I make my decision. Are there any questions?"

Everyone sat stunned. I had hit them with a triple whammy. The issues of birth control, gays, and celibacy were more than their minds could

comprehend at one time. Most of the cardinals just sat there looking at me. Others continued to whisper to each other.

"If there is nothing else, Eminences, I release you to go back to your jurisdictions with my blessings."

I left the meeting hall with security and William in attendance. We walked swiftly to my apartments so that I could relax, as the meeting was even more stressful than I had anticipated. I had expected one or two cardinals to resign, but four was more than I anticipated. We walked in silence and when the door to the apartments closed, I was greeted by our newly arrived Scotties and the nuns going about their duties. I went to the kitchen, where William poured coffee, and we retired to my study. It was only an hour until lunch so I decided against a snack.

"Well, that was exciting," William observed.

"You are the consummate master of understatement, William. The four cardinals who resigned were the most conservative of the bunch. Good riddance to them. Make sure you notify their home jurisdictions within the hour and start the hunt for replacements. I would like to leave the seats open, I think, and replace them with bishops or archbishops. I doubt very much if we can find any candidates for cardinal that are even near the liberal vein in Africa or South America, so

I would rather simply reduce the number of cardinals."

"Very well. Let me make the calls now so that I can join you for lunch."

As I sat in my study alone, I went over the decisions I had made and the reaction of the College of Cardinals. I felt deep within my soul that the bulls I had issued were good and honored the God I had vowed to serve as pope. Too much pain had been caused by the Church and it was now time to render more than just first aid. Many things needed to be fixed and other things needed reinforcement. I fully expected resignations among bishops throughout the world, and maybe that was exactly what was needed. I would direct my immediate attention to the Church in America, where I knew good people who should be bishops and bad ones who were bishops. This was the land of the religious right, who would go insane over my decisions. I decided to call the President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in America as well as the Papal Nuncio in Washington. I got up, went over to my phone, and picked up my extension, pushing the button for my office on the second floor. Father Michael answered the phone and I asked him to put me in touch with the Vatican Embassy in Washington.

"Vatican Embassy."

"This is the Holy Father calling from Rome; connect me with Archbishop Angelo Giovanni."

"Good morning, Holy Father."

"Good morning, Angelo. I have some news that will cause you some trouble as the papal ambassador, I fear."

"I am at your service, Holy Father. What is it?"

"I have issued a repeal of *Humanae Vitae* today and changed the Church's policy toward gays. I will have my secretary fax the text of the bulls I have signed and promulgated today. I have had four resignations from the College of Cardinals and I imagine there will be resignations among the bishops as well."

"What can I do to assist you, Holy Father?"

"Act as a listening board for me and let me know what you are hearing in America regarding these changes. I also wish you to contact all the archbishops in the United States and explain to them what has happened. Determine if I have their support or not. Also, I was going to call Bishop Henderson of the Conference of Catholic Bishops, but I think it better if you do, please. Can you do these things for me, Angelo?"

"Of course, Holy Father. I will start as soon as it is light here in America. Remember, you are six hours ahead of us."

"Ah, that's right. I guess you were sleeping, I apologize for waking you up so early."

"Actually, I had gotten up a half-hour ago for morning prayer as I have several early meetings today. It does not matter if I am sleeping or not, Holy Father; if you need me, please call me."

"Thank you, my brother. God bless you and keep you well."

Well, that went better than I thought it might. At least I didn't shock my ambassador to America with the news. William came back into my study and gave me his report.

"Well, the notifications have been made and there was palpable shock on the other end of the phone lines. I think you are wise to not appoint cardinals to replace them yet."

"I agree. No cardinals in the immediate future for those jurisdictions. By the way, I just talked with Archbishop Giovanni in Washington regarding today's events. Fax him the bulls signed today, then contact Caliggio and have him fax the bulls to all embassies around the world. We might as well let the cat out of the bag as soon as possible."

"Excuse me, Holy Father. Lunch is ready," advised the mother superior.

Chapter Ten

Dungeons And Cardinals

When lunch was finished, William and I headed down to the second floor offices to work. Before I could begin, I had a visit from Daniel. He came in carrying a file folder that was about two inches thick.

“What is it, Daniel?”

“One thing that I decided to do when I took this job was to look into the death of John Paul the first as completely as possible. I have here the result of a two-week investigation handled by my men. Based on this evidence, I have concluded that Pope John Paul the first did not die of natural causes as claimed by the Church. We have information that indicates that certain members of the Curia employed KGB agents to kill His Holiness. These conservative cardinals were worried when word leaked out that the pope intended to audit the Vatican bank, sell off some

Church assets to fund food programs, repeal *Humanae Vitae*, and raise the status of the homosexual community. None of this could be tolerated, so they took action through one cardinal in particular. He used his Mafia connections to contact the KGB. This cardinal later became secretary of state and is now in retirement and near death. Records indicate that a delivery was made to the Vatican in a diplomatic pouch from the Soviet Union, which was delivered to Dmitri Oronoff, a Russian priest who worked in the secretary of state's office. Father Oronoff was in fact a KGB agent in the employ of the Kremlin. Inside the pouch were two Egyptian deathstalker scorpions, which were placed in the bed of the pontiff. These scorpions carry one of the deadliest poisons in the world and the attack would have the appearance of a heart attack unless a tox panel was performed. Whoever planted them in the pope's bed would have retrieved them so that no evidence existed. He could have merely flushed them down the toilet. Once this was accomplished, the conservatives made sure that he was replaced by one of their number. The rest, as they say, is history."

"My God! Are you sure of these facts?"

"Yes, I am. Should you wish to review these facts personally, here is the file folder."

"Do you have the names of the conspirators?"

"We have three names, but I feel that there must have been at least six or seven bishops and cardinals in the conspiracy to make it work. Of the three names we have, one is dead, one is retired, and one is now a cardinal and was present in your conclave."

"Who is this cardinal who is still active?"

"Cardinal Eugenio Rossetti, Holy Father, Archbishop of Milan."

"William, summon him here at once. He may not have left yet."

"Right away."

"You have done outstanding work for me and for the Church you love and belong to, Daniel. Your reward shall be great in heaven for exposing this poison in the midst of the sheep."

"What do you propose to do, Holy Father?"

"When Rossetti gets here, we will go into the old section of the Vatican away from prying ears and eyes. There's an ancient set of rooms that were used to question enemies of the pope and the Church and served as a kind of dungeon. Appropriate, no? I wish you to interrogate the cardinal until he confesses or has to be excommunicated. Either way, he is finished as a prince of the Church."

As we waited for William to return with news of Rossetti, I reviewed the evidence file. There was

detailed information on who was meeting, when, and what happened afterward. It was all laid out and I was convinced of the guilt of Rossetti and the others. Now I wanted the names of all those responsible for the murder.

"Where is this Father Oronoff?"

"He fled the Vatican about a week after the death of the pope. No one has seen or heard of him since and it is speculated that when he returned to the Soviet Union that he was executed so that he could never be forced to confess."

"He must have had the help of the nuns that watch over the pope to have access to the pope's bed. Any indication of disloyalty there?"

"It is likely that he had the assistance of the nuns if in no other way than to cover up the true cause of death."

"Excuse me, Holy Father, but Rossetti is still here in the Vatican and was preparing to leave in two hours. I have summoned him to meet with you, *William advised upon returning to the meeting.*"

"Good. Have the Swiss Guard secure the old rooms below. When Rossetti arrives *Daniel, have one of your men* escort him to the place. I will station a guard outside this door to escort all of you below. William, let us go."

As I sat in the old Vatican dungeon by the light of candle and torch, I thought back on the

assassination of John Paul I, so much like the tragic untimely deaths of JFK, RFK, and MLK. So much more than a precious life had been lost in all these cases. With each died a future that could have been brighter for so many people. William arranged the sparse furniture so that I sat behind a desk with a wooden chair directly in front and one on each side. I had instructed Daniel to be insistent in his questioning and as William and I waited, I wondered aloud what I would do with Rossetti if he confessed. He was now seventy-nine years old, four years beyond retirement, but allowed to stay by the courtesy of Dominic V. I would make no such mistake. I heard footsteps echoing down the long dark corridor that led to these chambers and knew that the quarry was about to enter the lion's den.

"Holy Father, this is all very strange," Cardinal Rossetti said as soon as he saw me. "Is there something you wanted to discuss or show me in this filthy, smelly place?"

"Sit down, please, Your Eminence. My head of security has some questions for you."

Daniel took over. "Cardinal Rossetti, is it not true that as a young bishop you participated in the planning and execution of the murder of Pope John Paul the first?"

"That's preposterous! Who makes such an accusation? I wish to confront him and demand

that it be retracted!"

"I accuse you, Cardinal, based on the evidence gathered here before you." With that comment made, Daniel threw the file folder onto the desk in front of the aging prince. "How do you explain the actions you took in nineteen seventy-eight? How do you explain being with the co-conspirators? How do you explain your involvement with the Vatican Bank and the scandal surrounding it?"

Rossetti picked up the file folder and thumbed through the evidence, having some trouble reading it in the poor light. Daniel produced a flashlight and held it so the old man could read. When he was finished, he protested his innocence once again, albeit in the meek soft voice of someone who knows they have been caught in wrongdoing.

I spoke in a low, hushed voice. "Eminence, on pain of formal excommunication and laicization, I command you to tell the truth. I know you were part of the plot, and the only chance you have to save your immortal soul is to confess before us in this room. I want the truth."

"And if I do confess to such a thing, then what? What becomes of me?"

"It depends on how cooperative you are with this investigation. For now, you will remain at the Vatican and an announcement will be made that you have retired due to poor health and your

archdiocese will have a new leader within a month. The rest depends, again, on what you have to say. Will you confess and answer questions?"

Rossetti hung his head and covered his face with his hands. One of Daniel's men produced a tape recorder, turned it on, and placed it on the table. The old man looked up and frowned.

"So, I am to be condemned by history as well, and in my own voice."

"Eminence, I demand an answer now; will you confess to your part in the plot?"

"Yes, Holy Father, I will and do. What do you want to know?"

For the next two and a half hours, Daniel and his second, Gerry, questioned the cardinal in detail about what had happened, who was involved, and how they'd escaped detection. Rossetti also outlined the cover-up that followed. His total statement ran over two tapes and when it was finished, I sent it upstairs by Swiss Guard to my office with instructions. Father Michael was to transcribe the tape personally, and no one else was to hear it or read the transcript. The transcript was to have the now-former cardinal's signature at the bottom and Father Michael as a Vatican notary would witness and seal the document. When Rossetti was finished, he asked for a glass of water, exhibiting signs of stress and fatigue.

"Give me your ring and pectoral cross," I

ordered.

Rossetti looked at me sadly as he complied with my demand, placing both items on the table. William picked them up and put them in his jacket. Daniel then asked me a most difficult question. "What do you want to do with him now?"

I got up from the table and glared down at the murderer. "As of this moment, Eugenio, you are no longer a cardinal, bishop, or even a priest. I will sign documents today relieving you of the clerical state for this most heinous of crimes and mortal sin. I will decide on formal excommunication later. I suggest you go to confession and seek forgiveness for what you have done. For now, you will remain down here in the old rooms of the dungeon and you will not be permitted to leave the Vatican. When I decide exactly what is to be done with you, I will send for you. May God have mercy upon your soul! Guard!"

Two members of the Swiss Guard came down the corridor and entered the room. "Yes, Holy Father?"

"This man is to be kept under guard in these rooms. He is not to be let out without my personal authorization; is that clear? Have blankets and a pillow brought along with water and a bucket. See to it that he has meals so that he does not go hungry. He is to be treated well, but let me be

clear on this point: he is a prisoner and no longer a cleric. He is a confessed participant in the murder of Pope John Paul the first."

"How can you do this? I am entitled to a public defender and I have rights, Holy Father!" exclaimed Rossetti.

"Have you forgotten, Rossetti, that this is the Vatican, an independent state created by the Lateran Treaty? Italian law does not govern those within these walls; my office does. What rights did Pope John Paul the first have? I will make my decision within two or so days. Until then you will remain here and I suggest you pray with all your might that God be merciful upon you. I will send a confessor to you; whether or not you avail yourself of the sacrament of reconciliation is up to you. Your statement will be brought to you by a notary and I expect you to sign it."

I got up and left the dungeon as the Swiss Guard placed the prisoner into an ancient cell for condemned men. A chill ran down my back at the thought of what it must have been like five hundred years ago when these rooms were in use and more severe persuasion was employed. I truly did not know what to do with Rossetti. Before returning to my office, I paid a visit in the crypt to the tomb of John Paul I, knelt in prayer, and whispered to the tomb, "I have uncovered the truth, Albino; I now know the details of your

murder. You are a martyr in your own right. May you find eternal peace if you have not done so already."

As I entered my second-floor offices, I glanced at Father Michael, who gave me a stunned look and continued to type. "Father Michael, there is a guard outside who will take you to the former cardinal for his signature. When it is signed, make a copy and give the tapes and the original to Monsignor Hart before placing the copy in the confidential files. Make it your top priority."

"Yes, Holy Father."

We entered my office and closed the door with one of Daniel's men taking up a position outside. "This is why it is necessary for our own personal security service, William. We now know the amount of planning and the number of people involved in this crime. We now also know that the Mafia was involved as well. Have the Congregation for Clergy advise you of the status of those named by Rossetti. I want to know if they are living or dead, and if they are still alive and functioning as clergy, deal with that issue at once. What the hell do I do with Rossetti now? Any suggestions?"

"Well, you can turn him over to the Italian authorities for prosecution, which would be difficult due to his age and status, not to mention the scandal that would erupt. You can release him

to finish out his life somewhere without benefit of the Church, or you can keep him down below, which I don't advise. There really isn't much more that can be done."

"As for scandal, we can't avoid it. I intend to release all of the details of the murder. This is one bit of Church history that will not be buried. When the time is right, I will send out a full report. As for Rossetti, I don't know what to do. He certainly is no longer a danger, but do I allow God to judge him or do I seek justice here on Earth for Albino?"

"It is a difficult decision, but I do not recommend keeping him below. He will weaken quickly and I don't think you want that on your conscience or in Church history."

"No, I don't, but he must be punished. I will excommunicate him and declare him anathema. Make the arrangements for tonight. Let it be done in St. Peter's where all this began with Satan's admission into this holy place. Contact the Italian attorney general and ask him to pay me a visit tomorrow. After talking with the attorney general, I will determine the final disposition of Rossetti."

"Good. I think this is the best way to go. It preserves the dignity of the Church and puts the issue of prosecution into the hands of the civil authority. We can grant them jurisdiction in this case since most of the conspiring occurred on Italian soil. I will call the Congregation for Clergy

and get the status on the list of names. The attorney general will want to know this, I imagine."

"Very well." I paused. "What a way to start my papacy: the devil, sex, and murder. Speaking of the devil, have Father Marcel Claremont pay me a visit since I wasn't able to see him this morning."

Chapter Eleven

The Devil Is In The Details

It was just after dinner when Father Marcel Claremont was admitted by the nuns. He was shown into my study and asked to wait. I gathered William and together we entered the study. The visitor rose promptly and kissed my ring.

"Holy Father, how may I serve you?" asked the affable old priest.

"Father thank you for coming to see us. May I ask you some questions about your faith and prayer life?"

"Why yes, of course."

"Good. Do you say the Divine Office every day and celebrate or concelebrate Mass every day? Do you say your night prayers, and are you confident in your faith in the One God?"

"Yes to all of your questions, Holy Father. I believe that a good sound prayer life is the basis of

strength to face the challenges that each day brings in one form or another."

"Would you give your life for the Church and God if called upon to do so?"

"Without question, Holy Father. God and this Church are my life. What better way to express my faith in both than sacrificing the most precious thing I have aside from my faith?"

"Do you receive the sacrament of reconciliation often?"

"Yes, every other week unless I need to go more frequently. But as age has come upon me, I have less and less cause to seek the sacrament," he answered with a smile.

"Father, as you know, the Vatican exorcist died a couple of months ago and the office is vacant. I would like you to take on that office."

"Exorcist? I've never given it any thought. While I know that evil exists in the world in many forms, I've never been called on to fight Satan himself. Shouldn't you have someone with more experience?"

"The most important asset of an exorcist is the health of his spiritual life and his dedication to the Most Holy Trinity. You fit all the requirements for the office and you have an excellent reputation for piety. However, I must warn you that I am filling the office now because we have need of an exorcism, right here in the Vatican. Will you take

the role and fight Satan?"

"Yes, Holy Father. I will if you think that I am the one called to this ministry."

"Monsignor Hart has a folder for you. It tells of what might be the principal threat to the existence of the Church, and I will need you to oppose it this very night."

The Benedictine took the folder and began to read. William and I waited patiently for him to finish, prepared to answer the many questions that would flow from his lips. When he put the folder back on my desk, his weathered face was troubled. If he'd not been distressed, I would be concerned that he was not the right priest for the job. After a few moments of reflection, he asked only one question.

"Holy Father, this is a grave situation that must be dealt with with speed and certainty. You said you needed me tonight, I would ask you to allow me to prepare properly to undertake this task. May I have the time to do so?"

"I need you only if evil makes an appearance. Tonight I am formally excommunicating a cardinal of the Church using the ancient rite of bell, book, and candle. I want nothing to interfere with this and I wish you to deal with any surprises. Otherwise, you may take all the time you need to prepare to perform a formal exorcism on the Basilica."

"I understand, Holy Father. What time will you begin the rite?"

"At eight o'clock. Prepare yourself and we will go together."

"Yes, Holy Father. I will return within the hour."

"William, call Cardinal Caliggio and ask him to join us as a witness, along with Father Michael and the usual server staff. We will need an unused candle for the final act of the rite."

At precisely eight o'clock, we assembled in front of the altar of St. Peter's Basilica. Father Claremont participated but kept a sharp eye on our surroundings. I began the rite and after a few minutes it was done. The final act is the turning over of a lit candle until the flame is extinguished by the wax and the throwing of it to the floor. At that time, I also excommunicated the others involved with the murder.

"William, will you inform the former cardinal that he has been formerly excommunicated and is hereby declared anathema?"

"Yes, Holy Father."

After returning to my apartments with Daniel, I advised him of all the day's events that he was not already privy to, including the appointment of a new exorcist and the specific reasons for the appointment. To say that he was shocked would

be an understatement. However, he did not flinch in his dedication to his job and I was pleased to see him planning for consequences of the backlash over the two bulls. I was tired and said goodnight to Daniel. Soon William entered the apartments.

"He did not take it well at all. He says you tricked him into confessing by insinuating that he would not be excommunicated if he cooperated."

"That would be incorrect, as a review of the record would indicate. We have his signed confession for the history books, and those responsible must pay some price for their treachery. What of the others? Has the Congregation for Clergy gotten back to you?"

"Yes. There are no other remaining participants to this act alive. You have the last one below in a dungeon."

"I have half a mind to let him rot there. How despicable and fully corrupted this human being became in pursuit of personal gain. Well, as St. Matthew says in Scripture, 'What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul?' We will stick to the plan. I want a full audit of the Vatican financial records to make sure all the sticky fingers are off the collection plate. I also want you to prepare a statement regarding this entire affair to release to the world. Maybe then, we can begin to clean the blood off the Church's hands. I am tired, William; would you

like to sleep in my bed tonight?"

"That would be nice after all that has happened today. I need to hold you and be reminded of love. It took much hate, not to mention blind ambition, to kill a pope."

The next morning after breakfast, accompanied by Daniel and William, I had a meeting with the *procuratore della repubblica*, the attorney general of Italy. We met in my office on the second floor of the palace and after the usual formalities, we got down to business. We began by giving the evidence file, including Rossetti's confession, to the prosecutor. When the AG had finished, he gave the file back to William and began to ask questions.

"Do you truly want me to prosecute this man for a crime that occurred in nineteen seventy-eight? A man who is seventy-nine years old and probably won't live to see his trial?"

"I leave that up to your discretion, but the Church does not oppose this. I intend to release the truth about the murder to the world."

"Holy Father, you realize that I cannot use the confession that you obtained from him in court unless he restates it to investigators?"

"Yes. Daniel Wright here is in charge of my personal security and is former United States Secret Service. He and his men put this case together. They are at your disposal for any

assistance you might require."

"Are you sure, Holy Father?"

"The Church must be cleansed of past sins, but if you do not want to prosecute this case, I will understand."

"No, not at all. I just wanted to make sure that you are ready for the world to come down upon your shoulders when I charge him before the court."

"We are ready, Mr. Prosecutor."

"Where is Rossetti now?"

"He is here in the Vatican under guard," responded William.

"Very well, Monsignor. Would you ask the captain to come in from the hallway?" When the officer presented himself he was given orders. "Captain, go with the Swiss Guard and take a prisoner into custody. He is being charged with murder and other high crimes." As the captain left with the guard, the AG asked me when I would inform the world.

"When will you present him to the court?"

"This afternoon around two o'clock."

"Then that is when we will announce the truth regarding the death of Pope John Paul the first."

I had four hours in which to prepare for an earthquake to rival the one that leveled Old Pompei. Rossetti was placed in handcuffs and taken out through a side entrance, placed in a

police vehicle, and transported to the Rome central police station for processing. He was heard to curse my name in two languages as he left the walls of Vatican City.

"William, will you call a press conference for two o'clock in the audience hall?"

"Of course. I will set it up now."

Once again, it had been a tense morning and I needed to do something that I would enjoy. I decided to pay a visit to the housing unit for the Swiss Guard to see how they lived and make sure the conditions were not too spartan. When William came back, he informed me that everything was set, but that it would be three o'clock before the maximum number of reporters was available. The press would include Vatican radio, as I wanted the announcement broadcast live around the world. William thought my idea to visit the young men of the guard was an excellent one and we took a slow stroll by ourselves. Daniel and his men were busy preparing things for the rest of what promised to be a busy week. We got lost twice, but finally found our destination and accidentally entered through the common area. We expected to find men sitting around watching television or engaged in games of some sort, but we were met by silence.

"Where do you think everyone is?" William

asked.

"I guess they don't have to spend their time here when not on duty. Let's just have a look around the facility. It appears to be rather decent although they could use replacements for some of this furniture. These pieces are beginning to show their age."

We wandered through the common areas and into a barracks-style sleeping area. Like the common room, it was deserted – or so we thought. William heard the noise first and put his finger to his lips. I remained silent and heard it also: moaning indicative of sex rather than pain. One of the guards sounded in the throes of sexual ecstasy. We rounded the corner and saw two young guards through an open door. They lay on one bed, bodies glistening with sweat, as they writhed with pleasure. One man was atop the other, sucking his member. The one on his back ran his hands through his lover's hair as he enjoyed the intimate caress. I couldn't take my gaze off the beautiful ass of the man on top. I knew we should leave them alone, but I was transfixed by the beauty of their loving expressions. William pulled me to one side so that they would not see us if they looked up.

Without fear of being spotted, I took a closer look. Both men had short blond hair and well-muscled bodies achieved through hours of

exercise. The man on top left off sucking and moved up to kiss his partner for at least a full minute. It was clear that they were making love and not just screwing. After breaking the kiss, the man on the bottom got up on his knees. The other young man entered his partner and began to thrust slow and deep. They called one another's names in the heat of the moment, giving us the identities of the beautiful young soldiers. After about five minutes of intense sex, I motioned to William that we should go. I had become a little hot under the cassock, to say the least. I noticed a roster posted on a bulletin board and went down the list until I found what I was looking for. Now I had the soldiers' last names as well.

"Well, that was the *last* thing I expected to find in the guards' quarters!" I said as we left the way we'd come in.

"What do you intend to do about it, Brian? You're not going to expose them, are you?"

"Of course not, you silly goose. But I do intend to have a chat with both men about being more careful. They'd be drummed out of the guard had someone else caught them."

"I have to say that it was a thing of beauty and I could have watched them all day long."

"Yes, well, we invaded their privacy sufficiently, I should think. Besides, you're supposed to be more like Miss Jane Marple, and

not Jeff Stryker.”

“Hmm, Jeff Stryker....”

I responded by giving William a light tap on the back of the head for more than one reason. We returned with enough time to relax and have something to drink before the press conference. I took several calls while William made several, advising key people to listen to Vatican radio. When it was time, Daniel met me outside the apartments and we walked to the audience hall. I entered the room to a sea of flashes from the various print media as well as an Argus’s worth of the little red eyes on the television cameras. Despite the furor, I intended to do this with as much dignity as humanly possible. William addressed the media first to lay out the ground rules, and then all attention focused on me.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the press. Thank you for coming to the Vatican for this most important announcement. Upon my being elected as the new pope, I looked into long-held rumors to see if there was any substance to them. It is my very sad duty to report to the faithful that Pope John Paul the first was murdered on September twenty-eighth, nineteen seventy-eight, by members of the Roman Curia with the aid of the Sicilian Mafia and the Soviet KGB. Evidence has surfaced that indicates who was involved in the conspiracy to end the life of Albino Luciano.

One of the principal conspirators has confessed and provided the Church with a full history of the crime. He has been turned over to the Italian authorities for justice and is being presented to the court in Rome at this very moment. This man is Eugenio Rossetti, who was until yesterday the archbishop of Milan. He has been relieved of the clerical state, excommunicated, and declared anathema for his role in the murder. As far as we can tell, no other person involved in the death of Pope John Paul the first is still alive. There will be no release of any documents except from the Office of the Procuratore della Repubblica. All information and evidence has been turned over to them. The Church has been deeply wounded by the actions of these men and it will take a long time to heal. We pray that the murdered pope can now rest peacefully. He is a martyr for the faith and, as such, I will soon declare him Blessed. As the papal secretary explained, I will not be answering any questions and I have nothing further to add to this statement. Thank you for coming and reporting this tragic but important news."

I stood, ignoring the shouted questions that violated protocol. One does not shout at the pope, although I'm not sure that is a good restriction. I could think of several popes I would have like to have shouted at. We quickly left the audience hall

and returned to the second floor. I peered out of a window and saw reporters actually running to their vehicles while talking on cell phones. It would not take long for this bit of news to reach the multitudes, and the truth would finally be known. The press conference had taken exactly twenty-two minutes, including remarks made at the beginning by William.

"I think I need to go to the Sistine Chapel to pray. This has been both a terrible day and, at the same time, a cleansing day. Will you come with me, William?"

"Of course. Why not pray in the most beautiful chapel in the world?"

We altered course and the guards took up positions outside the chapel, which was now closed to the public. My eyes wandered over the beauty created by Michaelangelo. What was he thinking when he was painting these scenes? Was he angered by being changed off of the marble work he was commissioned to do and put on what he essentially thought of as decorating and repairing ceilings? Well, lucky are we for that change in assignments.

We said a private mass in my chapel in the apartments and then went to dinner. I was joined by William and Daniel this evening. Daniel assured me that he was fully aware of the

potential threats and that he would be up to full staff within a week. When office talk was finished, William and I told Daniel what we had stumbled upon in the guards quarters.

He smiled and commented that *we* were everywhere.

We surely were, even in the Vatican, and now, by my decree, we were welcome in any Roman Catholic Church in the world. It felt good to be able to say that.

Chapter Twelve

Something Smelly This Way Comes

Before retiring for the night, we turned on the television, which was now on satellite, and I was able to get CNN out of Atlanta. The headlines were all about my press conference and what it meant for the Church to admit that a pope had been murdered. If they only realized the history of the men who had occupied the chair of Peter, they would not be so surprised over a little murder here and there. As I turned the television off, they were speculating what the Church would look like today if Albino had not been assassinated. What indeed?

I woke up in the morning to a steady downpour, which always cast a pall over Rome that was quite unique with the exception of London. It was just plain dreary, and I was not in a very good mood by the time I hit the dining room for breakfast. The nuns were their usual

cheery selves, and I wondered if there was an order of nuns that took a vow of silence somewhere in the world. If there was, I had half a mind to send William there to learn their ways, as he chattered away beginning the moment I got out of bed and never seemed to run out of energy to move his jaws. I was in the perfect mood to send them all to the Roman Coliseum, but alas, that would do no good as it was no longer a housing site for lions.

As I arrived at my office I found Father Claremont waiting on me. He did not have an appointment but, then again, he didn't need one to see me. I motioned for him to follow me in as I sat down. Father Michael brought in a cup of coffee for me.

"What can I do for you, Father Claremont?"

"Holy Father, I just wanted to tell you that I have been doing a great deal of reading on my new duties, and what it means to the world at large. I would like to bring Father Andrew Michalson here from America. He is the diocesan exorcist for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and has more experience than almost anyone in this ministry. In fact, he once knew Father Merrick, who handled the exorcism that was used as the base for the movie *The Exorcist*. Therefore he might be aware of all the facts surrounding that rather infamous occurrence. I think I could learn much

from him, and having him here to help in tackling our problem would be most wise, I think. No matter what you think of my spiritual state, Holiness, I have no experience in this field. If it truly is the devil we are up against, then someone like Father Michalson will be necessary."

"William, will you contact the cardinal in Philadelphia and ask to borrow Father Michalson for an indeterminate time for service to the Holy See?"

"Yes, Holy Father."

"When do you think that you and Father Michalson will be ready to begin your work?"

"Possibly within a week of his arrival, Holy Father."

"I had thought to vacate the Vatican when this is done, and go to Castile Gandolfo so that I am out of the way and not a target of Satan if it is him present in the Basilica. What do you think of that idea, Father?"

"I think that you are the vicar of Christ on Earth and the most powerful adversary to our enemy that we have. How is your faith, Holy Father?"

I sensed that William was about to jump on the priest with both feet, but I stopped him. "You're right, Father Claremont. I am Christ's representative on Earth. I fear no evil and my faith is fine. Thank you for inquiring, Father," I said with a smile. It took balls to ask that question. I

liked this old priest. "Then it's settled. I will remain in the Vatican and participate in the exorcism."

I could tell that William was not pleased at the thought of me dueling with Old Smoky himself.

After Father Claremont left, I spoke with William regarding his elevation to the episcopacy.

"With all that is going on, I want to make you a bishop as soon as possible. Now, should I consecrate you during a public Saturday Mass or do it in a private Mass here in the Apostolic Palace?"

"Well, as they say, you only become a bishop once, so I would prefer the public Mass in St. Peter's as is the custom, unless you have a reason for wanting to do it in private."

"No, no reason for privacy, but I wanted you to have the option. Very well then. Let us do it a week from this Saturday. Would you make all the arrangements with the Office of Worship?"

"With pleasure, Holy Father."

"Oh, here we go again with the Holy Father. I told you, I'm making you a bishop."

"All joking aside, you are the pope, and you are making me a successor to the apostles, so in this thing, you are the Holy Father."

"I'm sorry. Of course you are right. I should not make light of this. Forgive me?"

"Of course, I didn't mean to chastise you; I just

meant that I take this very seriously."

"Understood, William, as it should be. Now let's move on with the thousand and one things we need to do. First summon those two horny Swiss Guards. It's time we took care of that little matter. Then let us fix the date to declare Pope John Paul the first blessed. I want to attend to that quickly now that his murder has been exposed."

"Of course. I will see to it right away."

As William left to take care of my requests, I began to think of John Paul the first again, and wondered if the evil that was let into the Vatican was responsible for his murder. If the exorcism resulted in fireworks, I would have to assume that the devil played a part in the martyrdom of the pope. My thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of the two Swiss Guards I had summoned to my office. A captain of the guard came with them, uninvited.

"Thank you for bringing them to me, Captain; you may go," I dismissed him.

As the captain left, the young guardsmen stood at attention in front of my desk. They were as handsome as my first impression of them, both in and out of uniform. I had considered my words carefully, for I wanted to handle this correctly.

"Gentlemen, have you any idea why I asked to see you?"

"No, Holy Father," they answered in unison.

"The other day my secretary and I wandered into the barracks of the Swiss Guard and found it deserted. Deserted with the exception of you, and you were oblivious to our presence because you were making love. What have you to say?"

The guardsmen mumbled and stumbled around with the language trying not to deny it, without admitting it.

"Are you sure it was us, Holy Father?" the taller one asked.

"Are you telling me that it was not?"

Both hung their heads and their posture told the story all too clearly.

"Why on earth would you take such a chance in the barracks within the Vatican? The last time I checked, Rome has no shortage of hotel rooms. Do you not have any place more discreet?"

"The hotel rooms in Rome are far more expensive than we can afford on our salary and no one was supposed to be in the barracks for at least two hours, Holy Father; we thought it was safe."

"Well, obviously it was not. What is your relationship? Are you casual lovers?"

"No, Holy Father. We have been lovers since we met here two years ago. Do you plan on exposing us, Holy Father?"

"Is that what I should do? Are there other gay men serving in the guard?"

"I can't speak for anyone other than the two of

us, Holy Father. As for what you should do, that is up to your Holiness. We love serving you and the Church and would hate to leave in shame. We would give our lives to protect you, sir."

"Do you truly love each other? Or do you use each other merely for sexual gratification?"

"We love each other, Holy Father, and want to spend the rest of our lives together. Either here or somewhere in the world where we can be a couple and have our love be respected."

"For now, I will mention this to no one, nor will my secretary Monsignor Hart. But you must cease sexual conduct in the barracks as of now. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Holy Father; thank you, Holy Father."

"Let me give your situation some more thought and I will send for you again. If your captain asks you why I wanted to see you, simply say that I observed you and was very impressed with your dedication. Tell him I wanted to express my gratitude for your contributions to life here at the Vatican. It isn't very far from the truth. Now go."

"Thank you, Holy Father."

I smiled as they left. Young love: no matter where you go, it will be passionate and in evidence. Now, how was I to protect these two horny lovebirds?

William came into my office to ask how it went.

"I told them to knock it off in the barracks. They

told me they are lovers and if they can't continue here in the guard, they will go somewhere where they can live as a couple. I intend to protect them somehow."

"Well, don't stick your neck out too far. You don't owe them anything simply because you're gay."

"It is precisely because I am gay that I owe them respect as humans and as lovers. The church needs to encourage love and coupling, not affairs driven by lust. See if there is a way to have them assigned to my personal guard and house them in their own room in the palace. Get them put on guarding the entrance to these apartments. Now, what's next on my schedule?"

"You wanted to make changes in some dioceses in the United States. I believe you are in a firing mood?"

"Yes. Please bring me the list of American bishops. It is time to clean at least one part of the house."

After reviewing the list of American bishops, I fired twenty-two throughout the United States and asked for recommendations for their replacements. These were bishops who had become consumed by their own sense of self-importance and forgotten that they were shepherds of the people of God. A couple also had covered up for priests who had violated the law

and deserved to be removed. There would be no Cardinal Laws during my papacy.

The rest of the day was consumed by the routine administration of the Church and the myriad of documents that had to be signed by the pope. At a little after five o'clock, William advised me that Father Andrew Michalson had arrived and was being checked in at the guard desk.

"Let Father Claremont know that Father Michalson is here and ask him to come along."

As I poured a soda for myself, I took a seat in the living room area of my office to await the two exorcists. I was curious to see what Father Michalson looked like and what his demeanor would be. After all, this was a man who had battled the devil many times, according to reports. As I waited, my Scotties decided to come to me and let me know that they were happy to be reunited with me and William.

I loved my dogs. They showed nothing but true loyalty and pure love untainted by ulterior motive. They brought me a special kind of joy and I was more at peace in our new home with them around. Not only that, but they served as an additional warning device even if it meant that William and I would share our bed with them once again.

Finally, both exorcists and William arrived for

our meeting. I made small talk to help my guests relax before I launched into the reasons for the meeting. "Father Michalson, you are asked to assist Father Claremont in preparing and carrying out an exorcism of a sacred space. Father Claremont is the newly appointed exorcist for the Vatican. However, he does not have the experience in this realm that you do." I then recounted the story of the letter from Pope Paul VI and the comments from John Paul II that were found in his personal papers. I told Michalson that I wanted an exorcism performed in the Basilica in case the late pope's fears were legitimate and not spawned of the imagination. What seem to horrify Father Michalson was not that the devil made an appearance on Earth, but that Satan had entered the Vatican at the invitation of high-level clerical personnel. He was obviously shaken by the betrayal when I made my request.

"Will you assist in this matter Father, Michalson?"

"Of course, Holy Father, but it is something that must be done with the utmost planning, and only those who are spiritually pure may participate. If it is Satan himself and not one of his minions, then any weakness whatsoever will be exploited to the fullest. I must warn you, Holy Father, that if it is Satan, and he becomes angered at the exorcism, the resulting chaos might destroy St. Peter's. Are

you prepared to make that sacrifice?"

"Any sacrifice that is required to rid this holy place of the devil must be made. There can be no coexistence with the fallen archangel within these walls. He must be flushed out. How soon can you be prepared?"

"I would like to study the original notes and letters of the popes on this issue. I would then like to avail myself of the Vatican library. Can I have two weeks, Holy Father?"

"Father, I don't want you to begin until you are ready. Take as much time as you need to accomplish this task successfully. Father Claremont will assist as well as any other clergy that you might need."

The next day we began planning for the consecration of William as bishop. The appropriate offices had prepared the rites of consecration a million times before and this one was no different as far as they were concerned. Obviously William and I viewed it as anything but routine and looked forward to it greatly. I had thought about postponing the event until after the exorcism, but there might not *be* a St. Peter's when that was finished.

The morning of William's consecration to the episcopacy was another brilliant Roman day. The sky was blue with high, puffy clouds and a mild

breeze cooled our faces as we gathered in the great sacristy of St. Peter's. This was in stark contrast to the storm that was brewing over the bulls I issued over a week ago. The conservative elements of the Church, including Opus Dei, were gathering to fight me tooth and nail on my decisions. This battle promised to be as difficult and acrimonious as the one we would fight with Satan himself.

More than forty bishops were present to participate in the elevation of William to the ranks of the *episkopoi*. When these were combined with monsignors, priests, deacons, and seminarians, not to mention various religious order clergy, the total went to well over one hundred and fifty clerics. Along with the clergy, St. Peter's was full with the faithful. Any time the pope celebrates a special Mass, the people turn out in droves to see the event. William was my first consecration of a new bishop as pope, and it was difficult to get into St. Peter's to witness the event. Security was extra tight due to the bulls I had issued. The Mass began at ten o'clock and lasted two hours. The high point of the consecration was, of course, the prayer of consecration read over the priest being elevated:

"So now pour out upon this chosen one that power which is from you, the governing spirit whom you gave to your beloved son, Jesus Christ, the spirit given by him to the holy apostles, who

founded the Church in every place to be your temple for the unceasing glory and praise of your name.

“Father, you know all hearts. You have chosen your servant for the office of bishop. May he be a shepherd to your holy flock, and a high priest blameless in your sight, ministering to you night and day; may he always gain the blessing of your favor and offer the gifts of your holy Church. Through the spirit who gives the grace of high priesthood grant him the power to forgive sins as you have commanded, to assign ministries as you have decreed, and to loose every bond by the authority which you gave to your apostles. May he be pleasing to you by his gentleness and purity of heart, presenting a fragrant offering to you, through Jesus Christ your son, through whom glory and power and honor are yours with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, now and forever. Amen.”

I then poured holy chrism over William’s head in the sign of the cross, presented him with the book of the Gospels, his ring, miter, and crosier. I personally chose William’s episcopal ring, and it was my gift to him. As I was pope, the jewelers went out of their way to make it a magnificent ring. After the symbolic seating of the new bishop, Mass proceeded as normal. The Church now had a

new bishop who would serve in the Vatican as long as I lived.

After the hundred or so photographs that are always taken after such an event, we processed out of the main part of St. Peter's and into the sacristy. From there we went into a large dining room for a celebration of William's rise in the Church. Ever watchful were Daniel and his squad of men, who hovered closely without being intrusive. We cleared the rest of the day from any appointments and enjoyed the time off, going through the extensive Vatican Museum, looking at and even holding some things of immense historical significance that the public never had the opportunity to see. It was a day full of learning in addition to celebration and ritual.

That night William and I made love in our bed and finished the day in extreme joy and happiness. I thanked God every night for the gift of William in my life. Now he was able to take on an even greater role in the life of the Church as a bishop. Historically, I certainly wasn't the first pope to consecrate a lover. In this case, however, the lover was qualified unlike some before him. Down through the centuries, popes had consecrated their children, favored lovers with no training who had to be ordained a deacon and

priest one day, and then consecrated a bishop the next. William would serve God and the Church well and I was pleased to be able to add him to the Synod of Bishops. God had chosen to be extra good to me by giving me the gift of faith, a vocation, and someone who the sun rose and set upon. How grateful I was.

Chapter Thirteen

Sulfur And Candlesticks

As the time drew near for the rite of exorcism, the atmosphere in the offices of those in the know grew tense and fearful. No one knew what to expect from the ancient rite once we had begun. Would there be a vengeful wrath of evil unleashed upon the participants in the exorcism or would the fallen one go quietly? No one expected a peaceful departure if Satan was really in residence, so we prepared for battle. On the morning of the rite, Paul VI's throne was located in a subterranean basement of the Vatican, buried under antiques from the Apostolic Palace. William was called immediately.

"Bishop Hart, what do you want us to do with the throne? Is it to be installed in the Apostolic Palace somewhere? It isn't in good enough condition to be placed back into service," advised the curator of the artifacts of the Vatican.

"No, it is not to be put back into service. It will be destroyed before nightfall. I myself will witness its destruction. Where may it be burned?"

"Well, if we take it apart, the pieces can be burned in one of the heating furnaces, but the furnace will have to be cleaned out afterward."

"Even better. The ashes are to be collected and given to me personally. How soon before you can take care of this matter?"

"Within the hour, Your Grace."

"Very well. I will meet you at the entrance to the sub-basement in one hour."

William told me that they had found the throne. "I will see it destroyed by fire within the hour. I have ordered the ashes to be turned over to me. Shall I bury them in the gardens?"

"No, get the ashes away from the Vatican. Have them dumped into the Tiber so that they are forever dispersed. Have one of the Benedictine monks take care of that task. I don't want you directly involved with their disposal. Is everything else ready for tonight?"

"Yes, all is ready. The Swiss Guard knows that they are to seal off St. Peter's beginning at nine this evening. There will be twelve of us taking part in this exorcism."

"Twelve? Just like the apostles. A good sign. Just in case, have medical personnel standing by outside the north entrance to the Basilica. None of

us knows what is going to happen but we must trust in God and in our common sense. I'm granting a special plenary indulgence to all those involved this night in the work of the Lord."

Later William returned and reported on the destruction of the throne. "As I arrived, I was met by the curators of the Vatican, who led me to the throne. It was old and covered in dust from being in storage. I ordered the men to take hammer and saw to it and after about forty minutes they had it in small enough pieces. They gathered up every splinter and I watched them consign the pieces to the fire. The only thing odd about the event was the wretched smell it gave off as it was burning; it was like rotten eggs and death combined into something that I still can't get out of my nose. I watched as they cleaned out the furnace and placed the ashes into a can with a lid on it. I had Brother Angelo Amoretti and a Swiss Guard plainclothes escort go to the Tiber River, where the ashes were dumped and the can rinsed out. This was verified to me personally by the guard detail."

"It has begun in earnest then. I pray tonight will see the end of the evil within the walls of St. Peter's."

Dinner that evening was light. I just didn't feel like eating a large meal. I did, however, have two

glasses of wine with my pasta. William and I then spent the next three hours in prayer in my private chapel. At ten o'clock, Father Michalson and Father Claremont arrived and were let in by security. Daniel and his men on duty both within and outside the apartments were as nervous as everyone else. They were used to outwitting human adversaries, not one capable of raining death and destruction down upon our heads.

"Well, Fathers, are we ready to proceed with the eviction notice on whatever evil force is within the Basilica?"

"Yes, Holy Father, we are. We have amended the rite of exorcism to cover a sacred place instead of a person and have the required salt, water, and oil," answered one of the exorcists. "Are you prepared for any possible reaction?"

"Everyone connected with this undertaking has received the sacrament of reconciliation. I have ordered medical personnel to wait outside the north entrance to the Basilica in case they are needed. Additionally, my personal security people will be present. Other than these things, I don't know what else we could have done to prepare. I remind you that even though demons and fallen angels retain their power to act in an earthly context, they are nevertheless subject to the divine forces of God and can be defeated. Our faith must remain strong no matter what happens during the

ritual."

"Holy Father, it is time we proceeded to the entrance," advised William.

"Okay, let's get this done and may God protect us and bless us this night."

We were escorted by the Swiss Guard through the darkened hallways of the Apostolic Palace and into the corridor that led to the Basilica. No one spoke a word and the mood was somber but defiant. At precisely eleven o'clock, the guards opened the entrance for us. We wound our way to the great altar of St. Peter's, covered by Gian Lorenzo Bernini's massive baldachino, a sculpted bronze masterpiece built over the altar to mark the tomb of St. Peter in the caverns below. The doors were closed, sealing us in with whatever malevolent force occupied the great Basilica.

All was silent and dark within St. Peter's as we lit candles at the altar as well as four free-standing candelabra. The combined light of the candles cast moving shadows across the marble floors, pillars, and pews. We were able to see the rite without any difficulty and the exorcist began the litany of the saints after calling down God's blessings upon all who were present while sprinkling us with holy water. After the reading of psalms, Father Michalson recited the first prayer directed to any evil that might be present.

"God, whose nature is ever merciful and

forgiving, accept our prayer that this sacred space of yours may be cleansed from all evil. Holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who once and for all consigned that fallen and apostate tyrant to the flames of hell, who sent your only-begotten son into the world to crush that roaring lion; hasten to our call for help and snatch from ruination and from the clutches of the noonday devil this space, this holy space used in worship of the most Holy Trinity. Strike terror, Lord, into the beast now laying waste your vineyard. Fill your servants with courage to fight manfully against that reprobate dragon, lest he despise those who put their trust in you, and say with pharaoh of old: *I know not God, nor will I set Israel free.* Let your mighty hand cast him out of this holy church, so he may no longer hold captive the worship and holiness that comes from this place, and to redeem through your son all your servants here present; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever, Amen."

This was immediately followed by a second prayer more forceful than the first one:

"I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this place of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the descent of the

Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgment, that you tell me by some sign your name, and the day and hour of your departure. I command you, moreover, to obey me to the letter, I who am a minister of God despite my unworthiness; nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this sacred place or the bystanders, or any of their possessions.”

I looked around like the others to see if I could sense anything out of the normal. All was surprisingly quiet and Father Michalson proceeded.

“A reading from the Holy Gospel according to St. —”

All hell broke loose with the thud of something heavy hitting the roof of the baldachino and bouncing onto the marble steps. Before us in a twisted bloody pile was the body of Brother Angelo Amoretti, who had disposed of the ashes of Paul's throne. He must have fallen or been thrown from the copula of the Basilica. Daniel and his men immediately surrounded William and me with weapons at the ready. As the medics were summoned, a distinct smell of sulfur permeated the air, making it difficult to breathe. The unexpected sight of poor Brother Angelo splashed all over the marble unnerved everyone present, but true to his duties Father Michalson continued with the rite, refusing to allow it to be interrupted

by this display.

“When time began, the Word was there, and the Word was face to face with God, and the Word was God. This Word, when time began, was face to face with God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him there came to be not one thing that has come to be. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not lay hold of it. There came upon the scene a man, a messenger from God, whose name was John. This man came to give testimony to testify in behalf of the light that all might believe through him. He was not himself the light; he only was to testify in behalf of the light. Meanwhile the true light, which illumines every man, was making its entrance into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through Him, and the world did not acknowledge Him. He came into His home, and His own people did not welcome Him. But to as many as welcomed Him He gave power to become children of God those who believe in His name; who were born not of blood, or of carnal desire, or of man’s will; no, they were born of God. And the Word became man and lived among us; and we have looked upon His glory such a glory as befits the Father’s only-begotten son full of grace and truth!”

“Thanks be to God,” we all responded.

One of the medics spoke to Bishop Hart and asked what should be done with the body of the dead brother. William ordered the body decently covered until our work was done. As a tarp was placed over the remains, Father Michalson continued the rite so that the evil one had no chance to recover from what had been done so far. Readings from various books of the gospels followed as the temperature began to drop steadily around the altar and we could see our pale breath on the air. The exorcism was definitely getting a response from some dark force, but would it reveal its name? What evil stalked the vastness of the Basilica?

“Almighty Lord, Word of God the Father, Jesus Christ, God and Lord of all creation; who gave to your holy apostles the power to tramp underfoot serpents and scorpions; who along with the other mandates to work miracles was pleased to grant them the authority to say: ‘Depart, you devils!’ and by whose might Satan was made to fall from heaven like lightning; I humbly call on your holy name in fear and trembling, asking that you grant me, your unworthy servant, pardon for all my sins, steadfast faith, and the power—supported by your mighty arm—to confront with confidence and resolution this cruel demon. I ask this through you, Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, who are coming to judge both the living and the dead and

the world by fire," continued Father Claremont while Father Michalson sprinkled holy water on all of us once again.

"God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I appeal to your holy name, humbly begging your kindness, that you graciously grant me help against this and every unclean spirit now tormenting this holy place of yours; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

"I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every spectre from hell, and all your fell companions; in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Begone and stay far from this place of God. For it is He who commands you, He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven into the depths of hell. It is He who commands you, He who once stilled the sea and the wind and the storm. Hearken, therefore, and tremble in fear, Satan, you enemy of the faith, you foe of the human race, you begetter of death, you robber of life, you corrupter of justice, you root of all evil and vice; seducer of men, betrayer of the nations, instigator of envy, font of avarice, fomentor of discord, author of pain and sorrow. Why, then, do you stand and resist, knowing as you must that Christ the Lord brings your plans to nothing? Fear Him, who in Isaac was offered in sacrifice, in Joseph sold into bondage, slain as the paschal lamb, crucified as man, yet triumphed

over the powers of hell. Begone, then, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Give place to the Holy Spirit by this sign of the holy cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen."

The prayers were interrupted by the sound of a low rumbling that started in the front of the Basilica and slowly rolled toward where we stood. As the sound moved toward us, candle stanchions that lined some pathways to the altar fell over as if knocked to the ground by a force as yet unseen. The flames of our candles danced wildly as if a windstorm had arrived in advance of the rumbling. Fear began to grip some among us and I urged faith in God as a protection against all evil.

"Continue, Fathers," I ordered, but fear had disabled the exorcist so that he stood frozen in place with a look of horror upon his face. I took the rite book from his hands and continued:

"I adjure you, ancient serpent, by the judge of the living and the dead, by your Creator, by the Creator of the whole universe, by Him who has the power to consign you to hell, to depart forthwith in fear, along with your savage minions, from this place of God, St. Peter's Basilica that is the most holy resting place of St. Peter and home to the Roman Catholic Church. I adjure you again, not by my weakness but by the might of the Holy

Spirit, to depart from this place of God, whom almighty God has been pleased to bless. Yield, therefore, yield not to my own person but to the vicar of Christ on Earth.

For it is the power of Christ that compels you, who brought you low by His cross. Tremble before that mighty arm that broke asunder the dark prison walls and led souls forth to light. May the trembling that afflicts this holy place, the fear that afflicts those who worship here, descend on you. Make no resistance nor delay in departing from this sacred place, for it has pleased Christ to dwell here. Do not think of despising my command because you know me to be a great sinner.

It is God Himself who commands you; the majestic Christ who commands you. God the Father commands you; God the Son commands you; God the Holy Spirit commands you. The mystery of the cross commands you. The faith of the holy apostles Peter and Paul and of all the saints commands you. The blood of the martyrs commands you. The continence of the confessors commands you. The devout prayers of all holy men and women command you. The saving mysteries of our Christian faith command you. Depart, then, transgressor. Depart, seducer, full of lies and cunning, foe of virtue, persecutor of the innocent. Give place, abominable creature, give

way, you monster, give way to Christ, in whom you found none of your works.

For He has already stripped you of your powers and laid waste your kingdom, bound you prisoner and plundered your weapons. He has cast you forth into the outer darkness, where everlasting ruin awaits you and your abettors. To what purpose do you insolently resist? To what purpose do you brazenly refuse? For you are guilty before almighty God, whose laws you have transgressed. You are guilty before His son, our Lord Jesus Christ, whom you presumed to tempt, whom you dared to nail to the cross. You are guilty before the whole human race, to whom you proffered by your enticements the poisoned cup of death.

Therefore, I adjure you, profligate dragon, in the name of the spotless Lamb, who has trodden down the asp and the basilisk, and overcome the lion and the dragon, to depart from this place, to depart from the Church of God. Tremble and flee, as we call on the name of the Lord, before whom the denizens of hell cower, to whom the heavenly Virtues and Powers and Dominations are subject, whom the Cherubim and Seraphim praise with unending cries as they sing: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth. The Word made flesh commands you; the Virgin's Son commands you; Jesus of Nazareth commands you, who once, when you

despised His disciples, forced you to flee in shameful defeat from a man; and when He had cast you out you did not even dare, except by His leave, to enter into a herd of swine. And now as I adjure you in His name, begone from this place. It is futile to resist His will. It is hard for you to kick against the goad. The longer you delay, the heavier your punishment shall be; for it is not men you are condemning, but rather Him who rules the living and the dead, who is coming to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire. Amen."

At the conclusion of that prayer, the rumbling reached us and shook the entire altar area with a fearsome force both deafening and disgusting with the rotting smell of death. Several of our group were knocked to the floor and I was shaken to near collapse when William grabbed me and supported me. I yelled loudly for the security team to leave. They could be of no help and risked their lives by staying. The sound rolled over us and continued to the back of the Basilica. Windows shattered high above Bernini's Chair of St. Peter in a rainbow cascade of glass. The smell was now vomit-inducing, foul and intolerable—truly the stench of evil itself. We breathed through our mouths instead of our noses in order to continue with the final prayer of exorcism.

"Therefore, I adjure you every unclean spirit,

every spectre from hell, every satanic power, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who was led into the desert after His baptism by John to vanquish you in your citadel, to cease your assaults against this holy place and God's holy church, formed from the earth for His own honor and glory.

Yield then to God, who by His servant, Moses, cast you and your malice, in the person of Pharaoh and his army, into the depths of the sea. Yield to God, who, by the singing of holy canticles on the part of David, His faithful servant, banished you from the heart of King Saul. Yield to God, who condemned you in the person of Judas Iscariot, the traitor. For He now flails you with His divine scourges, He in whose sight you and your legions once cried out: 'What have we to do with you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Have you come to torture us before the time?'

Now He is driving you back into the everlasting fire, He who at the end of time will say to the wicked: 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.' For you, O evil one, and for your followers there will be worms that never die. An unquenchable fire stands ready for you and for your minions, you prince of accursed murderers, father of lechery, instigator of sacrileges, model of vileness, promoter of heresies,

inventor of every obscenity. Depart, then, impious one, depart, accursed one, depart with all your deceits, for God has willed that man should be His temple. Why do you still linger here?

Give honor to God the Father almighty, before whom every knee must bow. Give place to the Lord Jesus Christ, who shed His most precious blood for man. Give place to the Holy Spirit, who by His blessed apostle Peter openly struck you down in the person of Simon Magus; who cursed your lies in Annas and Saphira; who smote you in King Herod because he had not given honor to God; who by His apostle Paul afflicted you with the night of blindness in the magician Elvma, and by the mouth of the same apostle bade you to go out of Pythonissa, the soothsayer. Begone, now! Begone, seducer! Your place is in solitude; your abode is in the nest of serpents; get down and crawl with them. This matter brooks no delay; for see, the Lord, the ruler comes quickly, kindling fire before Him, and it will run on ahead of Him and encompass His enemies in flames.

You might delude man, but God you cannot mock. It is He who casts you out, from whose sight nothing is hidden. It is He who repels you, to whose might all things are subject. It is He who expels you, He who has prepared everlasting hellfire for you and your angels, from whose mouth shall come a sharp sword, who is coming

to judge both the living and the dead and the world by fire. Amen.”

As I finished the final prayer of the exorcism rite, all of the candles at the altar were extinguished, leaving us in total darkness. I became more than a little nervous, not knowing what to expect. Was some great horned beast going to materialize and stick a fork in me?

William struck a match and lit the paschal candle representing the light of Christ from which all of the other candles were lit. Bathed once again in the light of Christ that was most welcome, we looked around and could see nothing out of the ordinary. There was total silence now in St. Peter's and the smell began to fade to a tolerable level as the temperature climbed back to normal. Only the sight of blood seeping from underneath the tarp reminded us that this had been a night of violence. I looked at my watch, saw that it was 12:14 a.m., and decided to read the prayer of thanksgiving for a successful exorcism.

“Almighty God, we beg you to keep the evil spirit from further molesting this place of worship dedicated to you, and to keep him far away, never to return. At your command, O Lord, may the goodness and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, take possession of this holy place. May we no longer fear any evil since the Lord is with us; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of

the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen.”

All responded “Amen,” and the exorcism was finished. One of the servers opened the side door and let the medical team and security force back into the Basilica. The medics quickly removed the body of Brother Angelo and a maintenance crew was summoned to clean the baldacchino and steps of the altar. They hurried to sweep up the tiny shards of broken glass as Father Claremont supervised. While there was still an air of unease throughout the Basilica, a feeling of peace began to settle upon us.

“William, order the Basilica to remain closed in the morning. St. Peter’s will have to be re-consecrated due to the probable demonic murder of Brother Angelo, as well as the presence of Satan in the Basilica. Let’s schedule the ceremony for eight o’clock tomorrow morning and then if everything is in order, we can reopen the Basilica to the world. Also, have arrangements made to replace the stained glass. Have Father Michael make a complete inspection of the place before it reopens to look for any other damage. And it wouldn’t hurt to have the tombs below inspected for any damage, and especially St. Peter’s tomb.”

“Holy Father, do you want me to look into the death of Brother Angelo?” Daniel asked as we walked briskly back to the papal apartments.

“Daniel, I understand it is very dangerous up in

the cupola and I don't want you risking your life by going up there. Have the maintenance workeres who are up there regularly take one of the Swiss Guard investigators up to look for any evidence. William, I want you to record the details of what happened in my personal notes for historical purposes."

As we said goodnight to Daniel and the others, William and I closed the door to the apartments and sighed with relief. In all my years of ministry I had never encountered such events as the ones I had witnessed tonight. Obviously both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II were correct in their assertions. I could only hope that the absence of evil in the Basilica would somehow improve the fortunes of the Church and the lives of the faithful. Time alone would tell.

"William, sleep with me tonight; I definitely don't want to be alone."

Chapter Fourteen

Is This What Normal Feels Like?

At 8:00 in the morning, the Congregation for Worship and Liturgy conducted a rededication of the Basilica of St. Peter and it was once again a place of worship and prayer. The doors were opened a mere thirty-five minutes later than usual and temporary windows had been installed into the openings that originally held the stained glass. Only those who participated or were on the periphery would ever know what had happened during the night.

William entered my office as I was signing letters and advised me that the Basilica was now open and filling up with the normal ration of tourists. The only thing to disturb the peace of my office was the distant clamor over the repeal of the former official line on the gay community. For the most part, the repeal of *Humanae Vitae* was accepted after the expected initial protests. As it

was made a matter of conscience now instead of church law, many came to quickly accept the change.

"Do you anticipate any major problems with the change on gay policy?"

"I have heard that the conservative elements in the Church laity such as Opus Dei have threatened to withhold donations and target the annual appeal from the Vatican for donations. Peter's pence might very well be light this year."

"That is a price I am more than willing to pay to bring justice on this issue. I would rather sell off the paintings of the Vatican rather than back down. Money really is the root of all evil."

"Are you fully recovered from last night?"

"As recovered as one can be after such an encounter! What do *you* think we threw out of the Basilica?"

"It never revealed its name so we will never know for sure, but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't Satan himself. Just the feeling of the immensity of the evil combined with the physical manifestations was enough to convince me. Besides, with the ego that the Fallen one has, do you really think he would let one of his lesser minions have possession of St. Peter's? You ought to look into which cardinals and bishops invited him in and seated him on the papal throne," said William.

"That was back in the time of Paul and the conspirators involved in inviting Satan in, are all gone now. This predates that even farther, so I'm confident they are serving in hell. Frankly, I can't say I'm sorry that the devil didn't actually appear. At least we won't have to go through life having heard the voice of Satan."

William nodded his heartfelt agreement. "When the investigator got up to the cupola, all that was found was a single mark on the walkway. Other than that there is nothing out of the ordinary."

"Interesting. How in the hell did he get up there in the first place? The Basilica was secured until we entered it. And why would he commit suicide? It must have been a demonic ploy to frighten us into backing down. It got my attention but there never was any question about stopping the exorcism and so his life was wasted."

"Who knows how he got up there? He could have been in there since the Basilica was closed for the day for all we know. But I too doubt that he committed suicide."

"Then we can go on with normal business for a while?" I asked.

"As far as I know, there is nothing dire looming on the horizon. So the answer would be yes, let's get on with the business of the Church."

"What do you think about a trip to the United

States with the pope?"

"Do you want to begin traveling so soon?"

"Well, it is one way to address the gay topic face-to-face with the opposition as well as the supporters I know we have on this issue."

"If you like, I will tell Caliggio to make the preparations. Just remember there is a hostile administration in the White House."

"We can deal with that a couple of ways. Schedule a meeting with those concerned and we can go over our options then."

"How soon do you want to do this?"

"Let's say in ten weeks, just before the usual time to return to Castile Gandolfo for the summer. Does that sound reasonable? And then when we return to Italy, we can go to Castile Gandolfo."

"As you wish. I'll begin to put together the meeting while you look at this new batch of correspondence."

While William was gone, I began to think of raising the status of John Paul to that of Blessed. I couldn't imagine that there would be opposition to this honor. It wasn't even that elaborate a ceremony to make someone blessed, as it was for actual sainthood.

When William returned I informed him of my decision. "I've decided to proceed with the beatification of Pope John Paul I. Since we now

know he is a martyr of the faith, we do not need a miracle attributed to him to begin the process. Go ahead and make the arrangements before I take any trips."

"I will be happy to begin the process. It is amazing that the truth finally surfaced. It would have been buried forever if the remaining conspirator had died before he confessed. We are lucky that the truth came out in the end."

"Without question. What is next on today's agenda?"

"You have a public audience in two hours that has been fully ticketed. You just need to show up and chat and bless some of the faithful. You can answer questions, but I think if you do you better be prepared to talk on the gay issue."

"Fine. If the faithful want to question their pope on this, I will answer. I do not fear what is right, what Jesus would want of His church. Have you seen Daniel this morning?"

"He has been out in the hallway talking to his men. He told me that he is now fully staffed at five men. The last is a former Special Forces man with expertise in explosives and how to disarm them."

"How sad that we have to employ a man with such knowledge!"

"True, but in these times it is better to be safe than sorry. Are you sure that this is the right time to make a trip to America? You just issued two

bulls that are not only controversial, but have angered the conservative members of the Church. A trip to our home country might be unpleasant just now. Maybe a visit to someplace like Holland would be more sensible. There you could expect support for your position."

"Would you have me hide from danger? Is that what you're asking me to do? Did Jesus hide from danger? Was he worried about it? Did he turn away from the path set before Him even knowing the outcome? No. Nor will I. He didn't even bother with such things as bodyguards, but then again I'm not the son of God."

"Well, if you have made up your mind, we will be in America in a few weeks. I never could change your mind about anything once you were set on it."

Chapter Fifteen
*Washington In The Summer Is A Wretched
Place*

The evening of the departure for Washington, DC, was a busy one. We left the Vatican in a short motorcade escorted to the airport by the *Arma dei Carabinieri*. There the delegation boarded a chartered Alitalia Boeing 777 for the overnight flight to America.

"Holy Father, we've made three of the front seats in first class into sleepers so you may rest if you wish," advised the steward in the front cabin.

"Thank you. For now I'll just enjoy our takeoff. William, come sit with me and enjoy a drink or two after we get airborne."

"I think I'll need more than a drink or two by the time this trip is over," William replied.

"Oh, you worry too much; relax and let things unfold. The fact that we were invited to land at Andrews Air Force base instead of Dulles shows

that the proper considerations are being given at least."

"I'm more concerned with what happens after we land. Daniel has picked up Secret Service rumors and rumblings that your visit is upsetting some people and they are a little on edge."

"Who, the Secret Service or Daniel?"

"Both. Daniel wishes you weren't traveling at all for at least six months to give people's views a chance to settle down. Still, no specific threat has been discovered so I don't anticipate any *major* problems."

"I want to enjoy this trip. After all, we are returning to our homeland in an entirely different capacity than when we left. It's kind of like the hometown kid made good. We'll deal with any controversies as they arise; I'm really not that concerned about it. Now, let's have a drink and watch a movie and then get some sleep."

I was a little awed at the scene unfolding below us as we landed at Andrews Air Force Base in Suitland, Maryland. We flew over military aircraft parked in different places on the field and I could see a small group of people by the VIP arrival terminal as the plane glided to a stop. We were directed to where we would park by a little yellow vehicle with a sign on back that read "Follow me."

As the jet engines wound down, the staff began

to gather their things, and I stretched before deplaning. The portable staircase was rolled up to the doors of the aircraft in front and back, and I noticed the vice-president of the United States waiting for us. Archbishop Angelo Giovanni, my ambassador to the United States, boarded the aircraft to greet me.

"Good morning, Holy Father. Welcome home!" Giovanni stated.

"Thank you, archbishop. It is good to be back in the states. It is also good to see you again and I hope my visit hasn't caused you too much grief!"

"Not at all, Holy Father; I look forward to your presence at the embassy for a couple days. It will be good to have you."

"Thank you for your hospitality, archbishop. I'm sure we will have much to talk about while you are traveling with me in the U.S."

Daniel and three of his men deplaned and I came out of the aircraft, waving to the assembled reception committee as William and the archbishop followed me. We shook hands with the vice-president and others deemed appropriate by the administration to be on hand to welcome us to America. After the customary speeches and remarks I bid them goodbye and got into the limousine provided by the Secret Service. Our motorcade left Andrews and headed for our first stop, the Vatican embassy on Massachusetts

Avenue in Washington, directly across from the vice-presidential residence. I had to smile to myself as I enjoyed my fastest trip ever into the District of Columbia. Amazing what a few police and Secret Service vans could do to save you travel time!

We pulled into the circular driveway in front of the Vatican embassy and the surrounding streets were temporarily blocked off until I was inside the building. As we got out of the limousine, the humid air of the city brought back a flood of memories. This was my home archdiocese and I had weathered many hot summers here. I entered into the coolness of the embassy quickly and was greeted by the staff of priests and nuns who worked and lived there. I was shown into the room to the right of the entrance where I found lemonade and cookies waiting for us. The nuns were obviously determined that I should want for nothing.

"Please, Holy Father, have a seat while the luggage is brought in. Would you like something to drink?" asked the archbishop.

"Yes, thank you, I will have a glass. William, join me."

"We've put you in the front bedroom on the second floor, Holy Father. From the windows, you can look out onto the naval observatory property across the street. While you are here, the

motorcade will remain out front under guard and the Federal Protective Service uniform division will assist with street control. If there is anything you require, just ask any of the sisters."

"Thank you, archbishop. You are more than kind. William, what is the first thing on today's schedule?"

"You are to visit with the acting diocesan bishop of Washington in about two hours. After that you visit the shrine at Catholic University at noon to give an apostolic blessing, and then you have a series of meetings here in the afternoon. You'll take dinner here followed by night prayer at St. Matthew's Cathedral."

"Well, that seems like a full day. Good. Anything scheduled with the White House?"

"You have a sixty-minute meeting with the president at ten a.m. tomorrow. You are also scheduled for a state dinner at the White House at eight p.m. The following morning, we leave for South Carolina."

"Great. I think I'll lie down for an hour before our first engagement of the day."

"Let me show you the way, though you know this place better than I do," the archbishop said.

As I closed the door behind me, I went to the windows to look once again on the vice-president's house. I remembered when the Secret Service wanted the embassy to close off these

windows as representing a security threat to the vice-president. The Vatican refused, saying that no one would be able to get into that room and the bricking up of the windows would ruin the façade of the building.

I removed my white cassock and lay down on the bed in my pants and undershirt. Closing my eyes, I thought back to the last time I was in Washington. At that time, I had been cardinal archbishop of the Archdiocese. I returned as pope, which I still had trouble believing. I fell asleep quickly and rested until William entered my room an hour later. The jet lag was gone and I felt ready to take on the rest of the day.

"Do you feel better, Brian?"

"Much so. I find long plane trips tiresome and difficult on my back. Is Bishop Matthias here yet?"

"He isn't due for another fifty minutes. You have plenty of time to freshen up. Do you want a new cassock?"

"No, this one was fresh when I put it on in the plane. I'll splash some water on my face and come down for a cup of coffee before he arrives."

As I entered the kitchen area the nuns fell all over themselves to get me whatever I wanted. I asked for coffee and was hustled into the dining room where everything imaginable that could go with coffee was waiting on the table. I smiled at William. "I never got service like this when I was

archbishop!"

"Yes, I noticed that. Must have something to do with the whole pope thing."

"You think so?" We were still laughing when the archbishop joined us.

"We have at least forty messages here from people who knew you before you were pope. Do you want to look them over now?"

"Give them to Bishop Hart. He will know who I'll want to talk with."

"Excuse me, Holy Father. Could I see you in private for a moment?" Daniel stuck his head in the door to the dining room.

As I got up I signaled William to follow me. I knew if Daniel was interrupting my schedule it must be important. We went into a private study to the rear of the embassy and closed the door.

"Holy Father, I've just been notified by the Secret Service that there is a plan to assassinate you. They take it seriously and so do I. All we know is that during one of your public visits there will be an attempt to shoot you. We don't know if it will be a sniper or someone close to you."

William turned pale. "There is no indication of where this attempt will take place?"

"I'm sorry; they haven't been able to determine that yet. They are requesting that you cancel your public schedule until they learn more."

"As to canceling my scheduled appearances,

that is out of the question. You and the Secret Service are going to have to protect me as best you can. I believe that South Carolina has more public places on the schedule than Washington. Am I correct, William?"

"Yes. Your greatest exposure would be at the shrine and at St. Matthew's Cathedral. The cathedral can be fairly well-secured but the shrine is a very large building."

"I'm not canceling either one, and let's be thankful that there are no stadium Masses on the schedule. Do the best you can, Daniel; I have faith in you and your men."

"Holy Father, the Secret Service requested to speak to you if you declined to cancel your appearances. Will you see them?"

"Yes, of course. But tell them they will not change my mind."

"The agent in charge of your security is waiting out front. I'll go get him."

As Daniel left, I looked at William and said, "Better let the new bishop of Washington know what's going on since he will be rather close to me during both public appearances. I want you to remain out of sight as much as possible. Monsignor Claiborne can take your place should I require anything. Better let him know now so he can prepare."

"Brian, this is crazy. If it is too dangerous for

me to be out there, then it is too dangerous for you. I can't let you go alone; I can't."

"This is difficult enough already without my having to worry about you. At St. Matthew's, you can watch from the upstairs choir loft used by visiting bishops. There are chairs and you can see and hear much of what will go on. Now let that be an end to it."

Before William could argue further, Daniel returned with the agent in charge of the Secret Service detail. The agent remained standing even though I asked him to sit.

"Holy Father, I understand from your head of security that you will not curtail your appearances. If that is the case may I request that you at least wear a bullet-resistant vest under your robes? There is a new type of Kevlar that we use for the president and we would feel much better if you would wear it."

"I want to cooperate with your agency as much as possible. If you would be kind enough to give a vest to my secretary, Bishop Hart, I will wear it."

"Of course. You will have it within half an hour. Please wear it any time you leave the embassy."

"Very well. Thank you for your concern and care."

As the agent left the room, I looked over at William, still pouting over his banishment from

the public schedule. "Look, it's less for me to worry about and I'll be able to concentrate more on my surroundings. It's better for both of us."

Daniel spoke up. "Holy Father, because of the circumstances, I would request permission to dress myself and my men as priests. It is better to fit in and stay close to you without looking like we are what we are. Will you approve that?"

"Yes, and I think it makes a lot of sense. William, will you make the arrangements? I'm sure we can outfit Daniel and his three men as priests."

William nodded. "If you would come with me, Daniel, we'll take care of this quickly."

"Oh, William," I called after him. "Have the bishop from Washington meet me in here."

After discussions with Bishop Matthias, it was time to go to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on the campus of the Catholic University of America, accompanied by Archbishop Giovanni. I went up to my bedroom, where I found the bullet-resistant vest waiting for me along with a worried bishop by the name of William Hart.

"What's with the long face? You act like I am already dead and buried. Help me get this thing on so that we can go."

After taking off my white cassock I put on the vest. It was not quite as heavy as I was

anticipating and when I looked in the mirror, I could not tell that I was wearing it under my vestments.

"Please consider one request. Let me ride with you in the limo and I will stay in the car while you are inside the shrine. Is that all right?"

"I could live with that, but won't you get hot sitting in the car?"

"No, they never turn the limousine engines off so that they remain cool. I'll be fine and if something bad does happen, I will be right there."

"Very well. Shall we go?"

Daniel let the security people know that we were ready to leave and all of the vehicles in the motorcade were started. Streets were once again closed off and the route secured. We left the embassy by the front door and climbed into the back of a new limousine. I was later told that this vehicle had superior armor. As the motorcade pulled out escorted by motorcycle officers, the sirens were turned on and we quickly picked up speed. We chatted lightly in the back of the limo, trying to keep our minds off of some nut with a gun. I estimated that we would be no longer than twenty minutes at the national shrine before we returned to the embassy. What could go wrong in such a short time?

As we turned onto Michigan Avenue where the university entrance was located, I saw the edge of

the large crowd awaiting our arrival. The motorcade slowed down to make the circular turn into the university and pulled up in front of the steps that led into the shrine. As everyone but William gathered their cassocks up so that they wouldn't trip over them, we waited for security to open the door. As we waited, the crowd began cheering and waving at us. I waved back, wondering why we were not exiting the limo. Finally, the door swung open and agents were everywhere as I got out of the car and waved at the crowd again. As I made the sign of the cross a loud noise drew my attention to Theological College, a seminary across the street.

I heard screaming and then felt the impact of a bullet. I was struck in the center of my chest, knocking me to the ground with a hard thump. Two Secret Service Agents fell wounded beside me. William leapt out of the limo and threw himself on me in an effort to protect me. Daniel and his men were returning fire along with Secret Service and uniformed police. As I lay there on the ground for what seemed like ages, I wondered if I was dying. I felt a severe pain in the center of my chest and assumed that the bullet had pierced the vest and that I would be joining Dominic V underneath the Vatican. Before I could feel any pity for myself, Daniel and William hauled me up and practically threw me into the rear of the

limousine. Daniel pinned me to the floor on my back as the limo bucked wildly and departed the shrine with a blast of sirens. I heard the Secret Service in the front seat telling someone that the pope had been shot and that we were headed to Georgetown University Hospital, where Ronald Reagan had been taken after he was shot.

As I lay there on the floor of the car, I heard Daniel tell William that the bullet struck my pectoral cross and the breast plate underneath my cassock. William opened my cassock and Daniel found a severely damaged bullet wedged into the plate. It had not penetrated into my body, but the impact was causing me extreme pain.

We pulled into the emergency entrance, where a trauma team awaited our arrival. As we pulled to a stop the rear door swung open and medical personnel climbed into the limo to make an initial assessment of my condition. Once it was determined that I was not bleeding out, I was lifted onto a backboard, placed on a gurney, and wheeled quickly into the hospital. Around us, a sea of federal agents and police converged on the area. Daniel and his men stayed with me, with the exception of one agent who stayed with William. I was wheeled into an operating room and placed on oxygen. My cassock was cut off of my body and the vest removed. Then my T-shirt was cut off so that the doctors could see any damage caused

by the impact. A portable X-ray machine was brought in and it was quickly determined that I had two cracked ribs from the bullet's impact. However, they confirmed that no actual penetration had occurred. I could feel the relief in the room that no emergency surgery was needed.

My chest was wrapped lightly and pain medication was prescribed. They asked if I wanted to stay overnight for observation and I replied that I had a schedule to maintain. They advised against any strenuous activity and I reminded them that I was the pope and had others to do my strenuous activity for me. The doctors appreciated my sense of humor. Seeing that I was hardly in shock, I was transported in a wheelchair to a private sitting room with a television. There I met with security officials and others from the government. All of the television stations in Washington were covering the attempt on my life and the wounding of the two agents. The media focused in on a priest carrying a white cassock into the hospital and speculation went rampant as to what that meant. When the agent in charge came into the sitting room, I asked him about the welfare of the wounded agents.

"Holy Father, Agent Steven Miller was killed almost instantly. Agent Darrin Maynard was wounded severely. He lost his right arm, but he will recover. The assassin was killed by return fire

from law enforcement and your security force. We found a Remington seven hundred, three-o-eight caliber sniper rifle with scope in the seminary tower. It fires the same size round that the military M16 fires and very few people survive a chest shot from that weapon."

"I am incredibly sorry for your loss of Agent Miller and my prayers go out to both he and Agent Maynard. Is it possible to see Agent Maynard?"

"He is heavily sedated at the moment. The doctors tell us he will be out for hours."

"Then let's go back to the embassy for now. I will keep the scheduled visit to St. Matthew's Cathedral this evening for night prayer. Prayers will be said for both of the agents. Tomorrow we have nothing but two White House events, which should be well-secured."

"Very well. If you are ready now, Holy Father; I will get things ready for you to leave."

"Yes, please let's leave as soon as possible."

As a bevy of bishops and aides fussed over me, helping me into the fresh cassock as I prayed for the murdered agent and the one who suffered such a severe loss in the line of duty. It made me appreciate Daniel and his men all the more. I also said a prayer for the assassin who had been killed by return fire. Did someone employ him to try to kill me or was he the typical lone gunman? While I

certainly knew the risks of being a controversial pope, I didn't actually expect someone to try to shoot me on my first outing.

I was wheeled out near the exit where I stood and walked to the car to the cheers of a large crowd. I did not dawdle but got quickly into the back of the limo, wincing at the pain from the cracked ribs. We sped away and before I knew it we were pulling into the embassy driveway. The streets were once again closed off and I entered the embassy, where a worried staff waited on my arrival.

"Holy Father, are you all right? Are you hurt worse than the news says you are?" asked the nuns and clergy of the embassy.

"I was very lucky today and have only minor injuries. Two Secret Service agents were not so lucky and I ask you to pray for them. I have orders from my doctor to lie down, but please wake me for dinner as I intend to appear tonight at St. Matthew's."

"To throw off more potential assassins, the public is being told that it is doubtful you will show up at St. Matthew's. You will enter the cathedral from the side door where you can go from the limo directly into the cathedral," advised William. "Security will be tighter than a nun's virtue."

"Well, bishop, the Holy Father should be very

safe then," remarked the mother superior.

I smiled and was helped upstairs to my room, where William remained with me for a few minutes to read me the riot act. He silently helped me undress, but as soon as I lay down, he started in.

"I told you this might happen, but would you listen to me and cancel the appearance? No. So what happens? A nut shoots you and two other people. Please reconsider going to St. Matthew's tonight, or are you determined to get killed here in Washington?"

"No, William. I am not determined to get killed but I will not become a prisoner in my own country because of right-wing nuts. I will appear at the cathedral and conduct night prayer. It will be more secure at St. Matthew's than it is here! Now please, I love you, but I have to rest; the pain meds are making me drowsy."

"You have been stubborn since the day I met you and you will never change. Well, if you are so sure that nothing can happen inside the cathedral, I will not sit in the balcony. I intend to be by your side; do you have a problem with that?"

"If it will make you happy and make you leave me in peace, you can take your usual place beside me. Now please go bother the nuns or flirt with Daniel or something." God, how I loved that man, even though at times he aggravated me to no end.

William once told me that was how you could tell if you really loved someone; they aggravate you but you stay with them regardless. I guess we really loved each other.

I slept heavily due to the medication and didn't wake until fifteen minutes before dinner. I was asked if I wanted to eat in my room but I declined. William helped me downstairs and I took my seat at the dining room table after saying grace. The nuns made their rather famous different-colored tortellini with various sauces. I was hungry and was glad to see a food that I genuinely liked. Pasta with salad and a little wine and I was a happy man.

After dinner, I thanked the nuns for a wonderful meal and went to my room to get a few things before leaving for St. Matthew's. The news was still full of the attempt on my life. The media was focusing on the lack of identification of the gunman. Even the tags in his clothing were missing in an attempt to conceal where he might have purchased them. The media further surmised that I would not be continuing my schedule and might even return to the Vatican immediately.

Archbishop Giovanni entered my room and handed to me a new pectoral cross to replace the one destroyed by the assassin's bullet. "Holy Father, this was the first pectoral cross I ever owned and it was given to me by Pope John Paul

the second. I would be honored if you would wear it."

"Archbishop, that is very kind of you and I accept it with many thanks. I will return it to you from Rome so that you may continue to cherish it."

William, the archbishop, and I came back down to the first floor and went to the exit. Daniel, with the agent in charge of the Secret Service detail, approached me and asked if I was determined to continue.

"For the final time, yes, I will keep this appearance; now can we go?" My tone betrayed a little aggravation. There was no response as they turned and opened the door for me. I climbed into the back of my limo with William and the other bishops. Once again the sound of sirens pierced the nighttime quiet of Embassy Row as we made the short trip to St. Matthew's Cathedral. The entire area was blocked off and after some difficult choreography we pulled into a small driveway alongside of the cathedral. The limo squeezed into the alleyway and stopped adjacent to the side doors of the church. The doors were opened immediately and I was able to step out and into the cathedral without any problems.

The great hallowed space was utterly full and the crowd broke out into applause as I appeared for night prayer. Even though I was surrounded

by agents of my own security as well as Secret Service, I would not allow anyone but Daniel, still dressed as a priest, and William to accompany me up the front steps of the altar. I raised my hands and gave the blessing over the crowd, who responded by making the sign of the cross upon themselves. I then turned and bowed to the altar, which caused a sharp pain in my chest. I breathed with some difficulty as I walked over to the cathedra chair reserved for the archbishop of Washington. The former occupant of the chair was now pope, something no one had envisioned. Beside the chair were two smaller ones usually occupied by deacons, but tonight they'd be used by bishops. A standing microphone was in place at mouth level and I waited for the crowd to take their seats and become quiet. The bishop's chair was made from marble, and my cracked ribs began to complain loudly. I turned to William and asked if a pillow of some sort could be located to put behind my back.

I then began to speak. "My sisters and brothers, I am very pleased to be with you tonight, especially in light of today's events. I am in relatively good health, having been saved by my pectoral cross. The bullet struck the cross and then a chest plate underneath it. I have two cracked ribs that will heal quickly. Tonight I ask your prayers for the two Secret Service agents who were not as

lucky. One man lost his life and another suffered a terrible wound. We must also pray for the deceased gunman that the Lord might open his eyes to the errors of his ways and grant him mercy. The forces behind this attack are agents of the evil in the world. This country, *our* country, has a terrible history of killing those who can influence the world for the good. President John F. Kennedy, whose funeral Mass was held in this very cathedral, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King Junior, all cut down by assassins before they could complete their good works. Has the intolerance of the nineteen sixties returned to us? Has someone in disagreement with my positions on social issues decided that the only way to resolve it is through violence? This is the coward's way of dealing with things that they can't accept. They are morally and intellectually bankrupt. Unfortunately, much of today's intolerance is being taught in churches due to ignorance on the part of both clergy and flock. I have come under great criticism for the official position that the Church now takes on the gay community. When I issued that bull, I felt I was correcting another injustice by the Church. It is hypocrisy to claim to be a Christian and to then violate the tenets of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus himself said to us, 'I leave you one commandment that is far greater than all others:

love one another and love the Lord your God.’ The attempted murder in and of itself condemns the opposing position. Why are many so quick to accept a new prohibition from the Church, while rejecting a new or restated right? If I issued a proclamation that alcohol was banned and a sin to drink, would the faithful simply accept and cease to drink alcohol? When I issue a proclamation clarifying the Church’s teaching on the gay community, so that proper respect and love is shown to a persecuted minority, why are so many quick to refute the new position? A large body of sound theological thought supports the correctness of the new position. If you could merely accept the fact that being gay is not a choice but a natural-born condition, then any argument against equality and fair treatment fades away. I urge the faithful to open their hearts to the commandment of love and to follow the words of our savior.”

After my speech, I said the night prayer. “Oh God, come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me.” Night prayer flowed smoothly with everyone participating. At the end I gave the final blessing to everyone as I stood and William gave the signal to start the small procession. This time we would go to the sacristy instead of the exit door. I had been asked to the rectory for refreshments and I accepted. The rectory was very

old and needed to be torn down and rebuilt. It was such a fire hazard that security officials did not want me sleeping in it. It bothered my ribs to walk up the stairs but I refused to take the rickety old two-man elevator. After coffee and desert, I spent a few minutes with those invited and posed for photographs. William could see that I was tiring and spoke up.

"Thank you, everyone, for your hospitality, but the pontiff needs to get some rest. It's been a terribly rough day."

I gave a blessing to everyone and we left the way we entered, exiting the cathedral out the side door directly into the limousine. We backed out of the alleyway and onto Rhode Island Avenue and drove back to the embassy.

"I think that all went rather well, don't you, William?"

"Yes, I really believe the people were listening to your comments very carefully. I think you might have gotten through to a few of them."

"If that is the case, then it was the right thing to do. I'm glad I didn't listen to some who would have had me cancel the appearance." William frowned at my attempt at humor.

When I walked into the embassy, I found one of the doctors from Georgetown University Hospital attending me at the request of the White House. He wanted to check my chest once again and

make sure I was healing normally. Other than a lot of soreness, everything was as it should be and, after receiving a briefing on the two White House visits scheduled for the next day, I went to bed.

Chapter Sixteen

The White House Blues

When I first woke the next morning, I could hardly move for the pain. William heard me moan and quickly entered my room.

"Are you all right, Brian?"

"Not really. I am sore as hell and don't feel like getting out of this bed if truth be told. But get up I must. Please give me a hand getting into the shower. Maybe hot water will help."

As I stood under the strong hot spray, I relived the previous day's events and said a prayer for the agents harmed while protecting me. What a way to come home to America.

Now I was going to meet with a president who stood for many things that neither I nor the Church believed in or supported. It would be up to me to strike a balance between what was good for the Church and what was right with Christ. I foresaw a tense meeting.

When I stepped out of the shower, William was there to gently dry me off and help me get shaved and dressed. The pain had eased a bit, along with some of the soreness and stiffness, and I found that the more I moved the better I felt. I got dressed and we went down to breakfast after saying morning prayer in my room.

"Good morning, Holy Father," rang out from the lips of everyone within the entire embassy as I entered the dining room area. The popular question of the day was "How do you feel this morning, Holy Father?" After I gave the stock answer of "not bad" several times, we sat down at the table. I didn't think I'd be hungry, but I ate a hearty amount of the good breakfast that the nuns had prepared. The nuns who took care of the clergy were a good group and made the lives of many priests a lot better. At least here, no ancient nun with bony fingers poked you awake in the morning.

"Archbishop Giovanni, is there any new information on the gunman?"

"Nothing yet, but we are hoping to hear something today. I understand the gunman's fingerprints are being run through all databases. In the meantime, the television news is still focusing on the attack."

"Well, that's to be expected. It's another embarrassment for America that the pope was

shot while on American soil. They need to figure this out quickly to save face. This morning's meeting with the president should be very interesting. William, how long will it take us to get to the White House from here?"

"Ten minutes at the most, depending on how much traffic has to be blocked off. We are due at the White House at ten o'clock."

"I want you in on that meeting. Angelo, I understand you are meeting with the secretary of state while I am there. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Holy Father. He will be at the White House also and we are scheduled to meet briefly."

"Please bring up my concerns about how America treats her gay citizens and other minorities. Things have improved in this country but there is room for much more. I despise the current makeup of the Supreme Court. Too many restrictions on liberty are born there."

"Excuse me, Holy Father, but it is time to get ready to leave," announced Daniel.

"I didn't realize it was so late. William, will you get the gift for the president from my room? Aside from that detail, I'm ready to go."

As we gathered in the hallway, the agent in charge entered the embassy and informed me that the second agent hit during the assassination attempt had died during the night.

"I am truly saddened to hear this. I thought he

was going to live. Can you tell me what happened?"

"He went into cardiac arrest during the night and the doctors couldn't save him. The trauma of the arm being shot off was more than his body could handle. He never woke up after the operation."

"I am truly sorry. Please express my grief to the family of both agents. Is anything more known of the gunman?"

"We hope to know today who he was and where he came from."

William came and stood by my side with the small package containing a book for the president. This was a signal to get into the cars and leave. The *apostolic pro nuncio*, or the Vatican ambassador in the vernacular, William, and I rode in the limo to the White House. Once again we departed to the sound of wailing sirens cutting through the warm Washington morning. It remained silent in the car as everyone knew I was upset over the death of the second agent. About three blocks from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, William broke the quiet. "Holy Father, you must pull yourself out of this funk, at least while you are with President Dalton."

"I know. I am just disheartened that our trip has cost the lives of three men. It is a terrible price to pay to show the papal flag in America."

We entered through the gates of the White House and arrived at the ceremonial entrance where the president and first lady were awaiting our arrival. Marines with the usual flags were present, along with invited VIPs. The door to the limo was opened quickly in this very secure environment. William got out first in order to assist me, for it was still hard for me to bend without pain. As I straightened, the president and first lady welcomed me to the White House. I turned and smiled so the photographers could record the historic meeting of the first American pope and the president. After a few minutes, we walked to the Oval Office, where we sat on the sofas in front of the president's desk. Coffee was served and the conversation began.

"Your Holiness, let me express my extreme sorrow for what happened yesterday at the shrine. I'm sure the Secret Service did everything they could to ensure you a safe visit to the U.S. I also want to assure you that we are doing everything we can to get to the bottom of this and bring to justice those responsible for this blight on the honor of the United States. As an American yourself, I'm sure you want our nation to stand tall in the world."

"Thank you for your expressions of regret, Mr. President. I regret that two of the agents lost their lives as a result of the shooting. I pray for them

and their families as well as their comrades that they leave behind. We here in America have such a history of this kind of violence—attempting to resolve differences with a gun.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I have moderate pain in my chest from the cracked ribs and it is a little difficult to move around but the alternative would be not moving at all. God chose to spare me for whatever purpose He has, and I accept that.”

“Holy Father, let me help make it a little easier for tonight’s state dinner in your honor. After the dinner would you accept my invitation to sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom? That way you would not have to travel back to the embassy and climb stairs and be in even more pain. All you have to do is take the elevator up to the family floor and sleep here. What do you say?”

“I thank you for such consideration and the honor of sleeping in the Lincoln Bedroom, but in my current condition I need my secretary in the same room in case I need relief in the middle of the night.”

“That’s no problem, Holy Father. We can put a twin bed in the Lincoln Bedroom for the bishop. Would that take care of your concerns?”

“In that case, Mr. President, I accept your kind invitation. Now I can also leave the dinner early and lie down for a bit should the need arise.”

"I'll have the arrangements made by the time you return for the state dinner. Now let us talk about a couple of things, Your Holiness. Your views on the war in the Middle East are a bit troubling to us in that you seem to think we are on the wrong road and that we should get out as quickly as possible. I would like to request that you give this position more consideration. There is information you are not privy to that mandates our involvement in the war in Lebanon. We are on the moral high road. Your position does not help to justify our continued combat operations to the world."

"Mr. President, I am against all war, not just the war in Lebanon. There has been nothing but war in the Middle East since before Christ walked this earth. We must find a way to stop the ongoing death and destruction. I don't feel that your administration has made any genuine attempt to sit down with all sides and broker an agreement that would be in the best interests of the people of the Middle East rather than the U.S."

"Well, may I point out that the Catholic Church does not exactly have clean skirts when it comes to Nazi Germany? Pope Pius the twelfth looked out for the interests of the Church and not necessarily the interests of the Jews or other innocent victims of the Nazis and Fascists. Isn't that true?"

"Mr. President, the Church has made many

mistakes over the centuries long before America was a nation, and I won't defend the stupidity of some of my predecessors. On the surface, it does appear that Pius was more concerned with the Church than with human life, and that is regrettable. But it has nothing to do with the expansionist policy of America in the Middle East. Not only are the Lebanese losing lives, but you are wasting the lives of young American soldiers. These soldiers are my fellow citizens and I love them."

"Let me ask you a different way: Would it have been right of America to stay out of World War Two even if it had meant that Hitler would have won, which he surely would have? Tell me, please, was that war justified?"

"Mr. President, are you really comparing that war with the war in Lebanon? One was a war of worldwide aggression with the extermination of the Jews as one of the goals. The Nazis' aim was to master the world, while enslaving millions around the globe. Lebanon is a very different situation. America has no vital national interests in the area unless it is oil, and the last time I checked there was no oil in Lebanon. You have troops there fighting Palestinians who are trying to simply live without even a country to live in. Whereas the Jewish people were once the refugees of the world, the Palestinians are now. The answer in the

Middle East is a home for the Palestinian people just as it was for the Jews. The killing end of a rifle is not going to get them that homeland. You must look for a different avenue to peace. Were you to bring a permanent peace to the Middle East, your legacy would be secure in world history. As it is, you are just another American president who has involved the U.S. in another blood-soaked war."

"Well, needless to say we disagree on this policy but I thought I would ask you to reconsider as you have asked the world to reconsider the place of the gay community in the world. This is a subject that is controversial also."

"The gay issue is an issue of human rights and equality. It is an issue of improving the lives of as many as thirty million people in the U.S. alone. This, once again, is quite different from the war policy of the United States. Will you support the granting of equal civil rights to the gay community of America and the world?"

"Will you reconsider your position on the war?"

"Are you suggesting that you will support equality for gays if I support your war?"

"I'm not asking you to support our actions in the Middle East, just eliminate your opposition to the war."

"So in order for you to push for all of the citizens of the United States to achieve what they

are entitled to under the Constitution, you want me to shut up about the Church's position on the war. Do I understand correctly?"

"I hate to put it so bluntly, Holy Father. You are advocating for equal rights for homosexuals and I am pushing for freedom and liberty for the people of Israel and Lebanon. Both objectives are honorable and worthy; why can't we help each other to achieve these aims?"

"The difference is that I am not using force to achieve my goal while you have more than sixty thousand U.S. troops in Lebanon."

"Will you cooperate? If you do, I will not stand in the way of any legislation that is passed in the Congress to expand the rights of gays, including the repeal of don't ask, don't tell."

"I will take this matter under consideration and prayer during the next ten days and give you my response, Mr. President."

"Very well, Holy Father," the president said as he rose to shake my hand, signaling an end to the morning meeting. "I look forward to seeing you this evening for the state dinner."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I also am looking forward to dinner. And again, thank you for your kind invitation to be a guest in the White House."

A feeling of frustration overcame me as I got into the limo. The president's attempt at extorting cooperation out of me left a bad taste in my

mouth. He really couldn't see the difference between the granting of civil rights to all people in the U.S. and my objection to the shedding of blood in the Middle East. Everyone in the car could see that my meeting with the president had unsettled me, but they had the grace not to ask. I did not want to discuss it in the car, where I might be overheard and my words reported. I did indeed have a case of the White House Blues.

Back at the embassy, I sat down with William and the archbishop and discussed the meeting. Both the other men felt my decision depended on how badly I wanted the president's cooperation. If I could achieve equal rights for gays by simply being quiet, no one would be the wiser and then I could do a great good. However, staying quiet on the issue of war might cost many people their lives, not just their civil rights. By remaining quiet, I would tacitly be aiding and abetting an evil thing. I could not do that even in order to achieve something I felt so strongly about. My larger obligation was to peace in the Middle East. My mind was made up; I would communicate my decision after leaving the United States.

I was sore and wanted to lie down more than I needed to eat lunch. William helped me up to my bedroom and got me undressed and into bed for some much-needed rest. It would be a long evening of forced smiles; I must be congenial no

matter how I felt.

I slept for three solid hours, waking refreshed and with more energy than I had when I had gotten up in the morning. I called down for William to assist me. As I showered, William began his ongoing dialogue with me, or the shower door, depending on whether I was listening. I smiled to myself at the routine we'd followed every morning for so many years. I pretended annoyance, but I would miss it if he were to stop.

I felt well enough to conduct meetings with various clerics and laypeople. A topic that frequently arose was the sweeping change made via papal bulls. I was pleased to be granted so much enthusiastic support for the change to the gay policy and the *Humanae Vitae*.

I was not due at the White House for two hours and I requested that the Secret Service stop at the Lincoln Memorial so I could pay a visit to ole Abe in his chair. It was only fair since I was going to sleep in his bedroom. My request for the unscheduled stop was approved, so I could have my five minutes with the statue that inspired awe and filled one with a sense of purpose.

As we pulled up to the memorial, my stomach growled and I regretted my decision to skip lunch at the embassy. Agents had gone up ahead of me

to secure the area and William and Angelo Giovanni helped me up the many steps. As we reached the summit of the memorial, I once again stood in awe of one of our greatest statesmen and said a silent prayer for his soul. Lincoln was a great man and a compassionate leader who did much for civil rights and made the U.S. a better nation. I smiled to think it was now becoming known that Lincoln had more than one male lover before and during his presidency. Gay people could be fierce warriors and they could advance the rights of mankind. When I contrasted the likeness of the man before me with the man in the White House, the flesh-and-blood president paled in comparison.

When time was up, we descended the many steps and were off in a flash. As we once again pulled into the White House drive, we found the president and first lady waiting as per protocol. We got out of the limousine and shook hands before entering the White House. This time the motorcade pulled away, as it would not need to take me back to the embassy tonight. The president escorted us upstairs to the family living quarters where the Lincoln Bedroom was located. He showed us where we would be sleeping. A single bed was set up alongside the queen-sized one. We then sat in the living room waiting out the few minutes until we would enter the East

Room, where all state dinners are held. Soft drinks were offered and chat ensued as we waited to make our grand entrance.

"How are you feeling tonight, Holy Father?" asked the president.

"Slightly better than this morning. Thank you for asking. I understand it will be days before I can take a deep breath without pain."

"I hope you will be comfortable tonight in the Lincoln Bedroom. There is a number by the phone that you can call at any time for anything that you might need. The staff is always on duty in the White House."

"Thank you again for the invitation. I stopped by the Lincoln Memorial on the way here. He was a great man who met an untimely end like so many others."

"Excuse me, Mr. President. It's time," announced a military aide.

"Shall we go, Your Holiness?"

We took the elevator to the ground floor. Once downstairs, we lined up by twos with the first lady on the other side of the president and William four steps behind us. We entered the East Room to the sound of "Hail to the Chief" being played by a chamber group. Everyone stood and applauded our entrance as we took our places at the head table. I said grace at the president's request and then the musicians began to play

quietly while we ate dinner on the famous Truman china. Many of the nation's leading Roman Catholics sat at the table along with the elite of Washington politicians. I smiled to myself at the thought of all these important people honoring someone who would barely have deserved a nod from them just a year ago.

After the plates were cleared, the speeches and toasts began. President Dalton was predictable in his short speech that welcomed the pope, a fellow American, and defended his policy in the Middle East. I was grateful that he kept it brief and resisted the urge to amend my remarks to comment on his. My words were those of a gracious guest as I thanked the president for his kindness and hospitality and mentioned my sorrow at the demise of the two agents. I toasted America and wished her a brighter future, which was the closest I came to criticism of the current White House administration.

We were then entertained by a couple of Hollywood's finest comics and music from the Marine Corps band. At around 11:45, I said my goodnights and William and I were escorted to the Lincoln Bedroom. We closed the doors and shut out the rest of the world.

"Well, I always wondered what these state dinners were like; now I know."

"Did you like it?" William asked.

"Well, it was pleasant enough but also rather surreal seeing all those important people sitting there at a dinner in my honor."

"Don't forget: you *are* a very important person now and they showed up for you. Just enjoy it for what it was—and now we get to sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom. How cool is this?"

"Well, it is *cool* and we should enjoy it because I doubt if we will ever be sleeping in here again. Please help me out of this cassock and let's hit the hay."

As we lay together in the same bed I went over the evening in my mind once again. More than anything else, it impressed upon me that fact that I could cause change and therefore had an obligation to do so. How I was going to try to make those changes was another thing.

"If you were feeling better I would suggest we make love in the Lincoln bed," William whispered and giggled.

"I'm sure we would not be the first gay couple in this bed. Bill Clinton had quite a few gay friends as well as JFK. Hell, one of JFK's gay friends had a room here at the White House. I can't do a lot of moving around, but if you want to take a trip down south, I would not object."

We slept soundly and I woke with a smile on my face. At seven a.m. we took showers and dressed, ready to venture out into the world. We

found a note had been slipped under the door telling us to go into the president's family dining room for breakfast.

We sat down at the table and two stewards were immediately there asking what we would like. Afterward, the Secret Service escorted us to the Oval Office to say goodbye to the president. The president's secretary was waiting for us and showed us into the Oval Office at once. The president rose and came out from behind his desk to shake our hands and ask if we slept well.

"Yes, Mr. President, we did. I once again wish to thank you for your hospitality and good wishes. It is time for me to move on to our next stop in South Carolina and then I will go back to the Vatican. I will keep you in my prayers."

"Thank you, Holy Father. I am happy that you were able to spend a pleasant night with us at the White House. Let's stay in touch and see if we can help each other achieve our goals."

"By all means, Mr. President. Have a good day and God bless you."

We turned to leave and found the agent in charge of our detail waiting on us. We were escorted out of the White House, where Daniel was waiting for us and now greeted us warmly.

"Daniel, ride with us please," I requested.

The motorcade roared to life as the limo doors closed. As we passed through the White House

gates I asked, "Are there any problems on the horizon for South Carolina?"

"None at this time," Daniel answered. "However, I wish we were going back to the Vatican. The possibility of another gunman still exists and we might not be so lucky a second time."

"We can't go back to the Vatican before our visit to the cathedral of the diocese in Charleston. There is a recorded connection between that cathedral and the evil we chased from St. Peter's. Which reminds me, William, is Father Michalson joining us in Charleston?"

"He is already there awaiting our arrival."

"Excellent. Then we are ready on more than one plane."

Chapter Seventeen

Spanish Moss

As I said goodbye to the staff of the embassy, the nuns began to cry. Nuns tend to cry a lot so I didn't take much notice. I embraced Archbishop Giovanni and gave a final blessing to all present before we left for Andrews Air Force Base. After a very short flight we began our descent into Charleston Airport and pulled to a private area of the field. There we were met by the governor of the state along with other civilian VIPs and members of the Church hierarchy.

After the exchange of pleasantries, we traveled by motorcade to the residence of the bishop of the diocese of Charleston. Upon our arrival we were greeted by the sight of a typical antebellum house complete with verandas and creamy white columns. The area had been locked down and we immediately felt at home in the quiet comfort of the house. Lay staff took our things and showed

us into the living room. We were served refreshments and informed that dinner would be in four hours. After checking my appearance in the bathroom mirror, I was ready to meet local dignitaries important to the Church. It seemed that everyone wanted to meet me and I was pleased that this level of interest existed in me and what I stood for. If there was to be stiff resistance anywhere, I figured it would be in the south.

Just before dinner, I celebrated Mass with my staff in the cathedral to the surprise of those who showed up for the regular 5:30 service. It went without incident and I returned to the residence of the bishop, who did not know that I planned a very late visit to the cathedral. Father Michalson was with us and was preparing for our more esoteric needs as we ate dinner. Dinner was quite enjoyable and after getting to know the bishop of Charleston a little better, I decided to tell him why I was really in his fair city.

After we adjourned to the living room, I asked to speak with Bishop Herndon in private. We went into his study and closed the door. He looked as if I were about to fire him.

"Bishop, there is a secret reason for my trip to Charleston. I have learned at the Vatican that your cathedral is connected to a bizarre ritual carried out the week after Pope Paul the sixth was made pope. Senior clerics in the Vatican and some here

in Charleston conducted a rite to seat Satan on the papal throne. As that was transpiring, a similar ceremony was conducted here. Since the discovery of this information, an exorcism was held in St. Peter's. The rite resulted in the expulsion of something evil and caused the death of a brother. Whether it was Satan himself or not, the presence reeked of evil. I intend to go to your cathedral a little before midnight and conduct a second exorcism if necessary."

"My God, who was the American bishop who participated in this thing?"

"We know that it occurred but not who participated. Anyone who was present is more than likely dead now. I would like you to join us tonight to assist and witness. It is your cathedral, after all, and you will be at the altar many more times in the future."

"Of course, Your Holiness, but who will perform the exorcism?"

"Father Michalson, the same priest who ran the devil out of St. Peter's. Have you noticed anything unusual or heard any reports about odd occurrences on the grounds?"

"Never, Holy Father. I would have taken action had there been such reports. But I have only been bishop here for three years. Something could have occurred in the past that I don't know about."

"John Paul the second mentioned encountering

something evil that he called the *superforce*. Two popes have reported on this phenomenon and I know what I witnessed personally. If it is here as well, we will likely encounter it. I suggest that you consult your confessor."

"I agree, Holy Father. May I go to you for the sacrament?"

"Of course."

After the sacrament of reconciliation was given, I went to my room and found William waiting for me. "You know, of course, that you have injured ribs. I'm not sure it's a good idea for you to be battling the devil in this condition. It would be easy to seriously hurt you."

"Might I remind you, my dear friend, that Brother Angelo was in perfect health and he still died when he hit the floor. If it is meant to be then let the will of the Father be."

"Well, at least rest a little before going over there."

"Very well. Get me up in exactly one hour."

It was 10:45 p.m. and once again we were going to enter a church in search of Satan. I still could not figure out what South Carolina had to do with the Vatican and the enthronement of the devil and maybe I never would, but if evil was here I would fight it. As we gathered to enter into the cathedral, everyone spoke in the hushed tones of those about

to enter a battlefield. "Bishop, is the throne that's in the cathedral the same one that has been there since the nineteen sixties?" I asked.

"I don't think so, Holy Father. I think this throne was put in by my immediate predecessor."

"Find out what happened to that chair, and if it still exists, burn it."

"Yes, Holy Father."

"Shall we go, Holy Father?" asked Father Michalson.

We entered the cathedral through the side door facing the rectory and processed to the altar, where the candles were lit. We were an island of light in total darkness as we waited for the stroke of midnight. All of our senses were keenly sharpened, attuned for the slightest change in temperature, smell, or sound. We knew what to expect after St. Peter's.

As the minutes passed by, the church remained a quiet, empty, dark structure with no sign of supernatural occurrences. At 12:15 a.m., Father Michalson read prayers for the cleansing of a church that might have had a crime committed within its walls. I read the blessing for a sacred space and we finished. Nothing untoward happened and we concluded that there was no evil presence in this cathedral. We left the way we entered and returned to the bishop's residence.

"Well, Holy Father, I am deeply relieved to

know that there is nothing lurking in my cathedral, but I am sincerely thankful that you came here to make sure."

"As am I. Please keep an eye open for anything strange and tell no one of our conversation regarding what happened in Rome. We don't need that story floating about, causing panic."

"Certainly. I can understand completely."

"How were the recent bulls received by the people? Have you had any trouble from the laity or clergy over our change in policy on gays or birth control?"

"Some grumbles, but nothing serious. Actually, the birth control issue has been more controversial than gay rights. People can accept the fact that you want to bring equality in the name of God, but they have trouble with the interdiction into the process of life."

"Then I rely on you to teach them what it's like for children in countries like Africa who die for lack of sufficient food. Ask them, which is the greater evil? Which is for the greater good of mankind? I didn't make the decision lightly. The world is overpopulated and starving. We need to cut down on the birth rate to avoid much larger tragedies in the future. Make them understand, bishop."

"I will do my best, Holy Father. I personally understand and support your move. I think it

should have been done a long while ago."

"Pope John Paul the first was going to do exactly as I have done, but he was murdered."

"I will do all I can to help the faithful to understand the changes."

"Thank you, bishop. We will leave tomorrow evening for Rome so I can rest and allow my ribs to fully heal. I hope everyone understands. I will celebrate Mass tomorrow afternoon at the cathedral at five."

"I will make the announcement, Holy Father. Do you want tickets to go to financial supporters of the Church?"

"Yes, but also set aside at least two hundred for the parishioners, especially the elderly. Please let the governor's office and mayor's office know as they were gracious to meet us at the airport."

I informed Daniel about the new plans. He notified the Secret Service and the people running the transportation. All would be ready at 8:00 p.m. the next day.

"Well, it is late and I think I'll turn in. William, give me a hand getting out of my cassock please. I'll be up by eight in the morning, bishop."

"Goodnight, Holy Father."

As William helped me undress, we discussed the visit to the cathedral and found that we were both very relieved not to have another major battle

on our hands. No one had to die and the cathedral wasn't wrecked. It would be good to get back to the Vatican, where I could take a couple days to heal properly. Tomorrow was going to be a long day, ending with the flight to Rome. I cleared my mind and slept through the night.

After a hearty breakfast, I gave an audience to members of the community in the local high school auditorium so the faithful could put questions to their pope. It went very well, with the exception of two verbal attacks on gay policy. These Bible-Belters just could not fathom the concept that God designed gay people as well as straight. Many were just thankful to be able to talk to the pope, instead of being kept at a distance. It was a good chance for me to explain myself to them. The bishop was right; the people didn't understand the repeal of *Humanae Vitae*, but they were more accepting on the gay issue. I was confident that in time they would understand both. I ended the meeting with a papal blessing and instead of ducking out a side door, I walked among the people to the front of the school. The faithful were able to touch me, receive personal blessings, and have sacred objects blessed. One newspaper called it the greatest PR stunt in the history of the Church. I didn't think of it that way; I just felt it was right to be in contact with the

flock.

After returning to the residence, I had a few minutes to get comfortable before the fully ticketed Mass. It would be my last in the United States on this trip. On the next U.S. trip, I would do the stadium circuit of masses for the multitudes, but this time I was on a mission.

At precisely 5:00 my last public appearance began with our entrance into the cathedral. It went off like clockwork. The bishop gave the homily and talked of forgiveness and love and what it meant to be an inclusive God. True to his word, the bishop had already begun his teaching of his flock. He was a good man and I intended to keep an eye on him. He might one day be a cardinal.

After Mass was over we had a final dinner and prepared to leave for the airport. The Secret Service was determined to make sure that I got off without a hitch, as they were glad to be rid of the responsibility for my safety. It had been a difficult visit and one I hoped would never be repeated. As I boarded the aircraft I turned and waved to the governor and the vice- president, and took my seat along with everyone else. We were wheels up at 8:07 p.m. After a refueling stop scheduled in Germany, we would fly directly to Rome. It was a fairly comfortable flight with smooth air and after watching a movie with a nightcap, I slept my way over the Atlantic. William woke me in Frankfurt

and I prepared myself for the landing in Rome.

As we touched down, I sighed. "Well, that concludes my first overseas trip as pope. I pray the next one will be a lot more peaceful."

All William said was "Amen."

The cars were waiting on the tarmac and we sped off to the Vatican under escort. As we passed through the gates I felt a certain relief at being where people might not be so inclined to take shots at me. We quickly arrived at the papal apartments for a light breakfast and then to the office to catch up on things. Vatican cardinals were waiting to inquire after my health. Once they saw that I was all right, they went back to work. Daniel met with his men to see if anything of note came up while we were away. The heat was already beginning to build in Rome and I knew we would soon be leaving for Castile Gandolfo and its lake. Rome was as bad as Washington in the summer months.

A stack of papers dealing with assignments and nominations for bishop waited for me to review and sign. I had to replace the ones I fired in the U.S. and others that were retiring. Once I attended to the paperwork nothing else needed urgent attention and I retired to my apartments. William joined me about an hour later, suffering from jet lag.

"Nothing out of the ordinary has happened

while we were gone, you'll be glad to know. The stained glass has been replaced already. I've inspected it and it is good work."

"Well, that's good news all around then." I was interrupted by the doorbell. Daniel joined William and me.

"Holy Father, I just received a report from the Secret Service in America. The gunman's name was Lester Dupree, a former sniper with the military known to hire out his services. Apparently, he has killed twenty-two men, not including the two agents. Whoever hired him was serious about getting rid of you. It is a miracle that you were saved by your pectoral cross and breastplate. Dupree has a reputation for making the kill every time. The FBI is continuing the investigation into who hired him."

"So it was a conspiracy and not the lone gunman that America has seen too much of in the past. We must find out who was behind it or they will surely try again at some point. I don't want to spend my papacy looking over my shoulder and ducking every time a car backfires."

"Everyone is doing all that can be done to find the people responsible. As soon as I know anything, I will report to you at once. I think my entire unit should go everywhere with you, Holy Father. There's nothing to say that they won't cross the ocean to come after you."

"Now there's a pleasant thought. Whatever you wish, Daniel; I told you when I hired you that you were in charge of my security and that I trusted you. Don't prove me wrong. By the way, you might as well tell your men to pack up because we will be going to Castile Gandolfo tomorrow for the summer."

"Very well, Holy Father. I will tell them now. Who is at the property now?"

"Swiss Guard and local police," William answered.

"I'm going to send two men on ahead to make sure everything is secure. It's about twenty minutes south of Rome, right?"

"Yes, depending on traffic, which goes without saying in Rome," William responded.

As Daniel left, I shook my head in wonderment at what the world had become. "I think hiring that man was the smartest thing I could have done. He may save both our lives one day."

Chapter Eighteen

Summer On The Lake

After a goodnight's sleep, we loaded the cars and left under escort to Castile Gandolfo. The papal summer residence is located south of Rome in a little town perched above Lake Albano. The town grew up around the papal residence, which has been located by the lake since the 1600s, when Pope Urban VIII started the tradition of getting out of Rome when it got hot. The breezes from the lake below provided a natural cooling effect and the town church, San Tommaso di Villanova, which is opposite of the entrance to the papal palace, was designed by Bernini.

As I stepped out of the Mercedes at the Castile, I felt the cool caress of the air from the lake. I breathed deeply and felt tension begin to ease from my body. This might be the best place in the world to fully recover from my injured ribs.

We were met by Daniel's men along with the

nuns and brothers who took care of the palace. On the inside, along with what you would expect, the papal bedroom was connected to a second bedroom reserved for an aide to the pope. It worked out perfectly for William and me.

He dropped off his suitcase on the bed in the attached bedroom and got me out of the clericals of the pope and into relaxed lay clothes. I was determined to unwind from the trip to America and all of the events since I was chosen pope. I began to understand how important Camp David was to the American presidents.

Fully relaxed in clothing that was not white, did not hang to the floor, or bite at the neck, we left the bedrooms and went out onto a covered veranda overlooking the lake. The view was magnificent and I wondered if I would ever want to go back to Rome.

Since I was now in residence, there was an increased presence of Swiss Guards as well as a full domestic staff. The palace itself was surrounded by a very high wall that would be difficult to get over and was fenced where the cliffs went down to the lake. I invited Daniel and his lieutenant to join William and me for dinner on the veranda. I found the nuns here to be as talented in the kitchen as their counterparts in Rome. We had a wonderful dinner of Italian sausage, potatoes, and a large crisp salad. Coffee

and dessert were also served.

Daniel's lieutenant excused himself and went to check all the guard posts before dusk settled in around the palace. I took this opportunity to confide in Daniel the true relationship between myself and William. His response was simple and a little surprising.

"I wouldn't be good at my job if I couldn't read the interactions between people. It wasn't anything you said, but the way you spoke to each other and acted, especially when you were alone. I figured when you assigned a guard to the bishop that he was your partner. I wish I was as lucky."

"There is no reason that you can't find someone to love and be with as long as you are very discreet. I have no problem allowing you to live with your life partner; in fact, I would be happy if you did. My lord, we have a pair of lovers guarding the outside entrance to the papal apartments in Rome. They now share a room so they can be near their post. Is there anyone that interests you in the law enforcement field who could serve in the papal household?"

"Yes, Holy Father, there is. I left him behind to take this job. We were only beginning to become serious, but I do miss him very much, and think of him every day."

"What does he do?"

"He is a uniformed police officer in a small

town called Cheverly, Maryland. I met him when I was with the service. We were dating for about the past six months and talked briefly about living together, but he was afraid that the department would figure out he was gay. We talk on the phone just about every other day and he misses me also."

"Do you think you will come to love this man?"

"Holy Father, I believe that he is the one for me. Our feelings for each other are a lot stronger than friendship. I think I already love him, but I could not turn down the chance to become head of your security. My training is utilized to the fullest in this job, an opportunity I would not be allowed back home. The only thing I am missing is personal companionship."

"What about your other men? Are they gay?"

"Not as far as I know, and they don't know about me."

"Why don't you go call this policeman of yours and see if he wants to live in a Palace?"

Daniel smiled broadly and said, "Yes, sir." He left the table.

I turned to William. "If he has a man in his life here in our home, then he will be even more effective at his job. He will have all aspects of his personhood and his needs filled. I understand Daniel fairly well. I hope the young man says yes. As for his men, they have the option of finding a

beautiful woman on their off time if that's their wish. Rome is certainly full of beautiful women. Daniel is far more constrained as the head of my personal security detail. He just can't go running off to gay bars. I want him to be happy – as happy as we are."

"That makes sense, but will you allow them to live together in the same room? How will that be explained? You could be accused of allowing these men to live in sin."

"Well, it's not like we can let them get married now, is it? It will be a few more years before that happens. Until then, this sort of arrangement is necessary. We have to be very discreet, but it is not impossible to deal with. Are there any connecting guest rooms in the palace?"

"There are two sets, which are usually reserved for heads of state and their security people. I suppose we could give them one of those suites since they're not used very often. We would still have the other set of rooms to use for important guests."

"Well, let's see what happens and we'll take it from there," I replied. "Maybe we can just have another floor built on top of the Apostolic Palace!"

"Let's take a walk in the gardens; they look beautiful and we won't be able to see much in another twenty minutes," suggested William.

As we walked through the papal gardens,

enjoying both the sight and fragrance of the flowers, I had the strongest urge to hold William's hand. There were benches scattered throughout the gardens and we sat down on one. I of course did not take William's hand, as there were some sacrifices we had to make for the good of the Church. This was a tiny one that we both could live with. I couldn't believe how peaceful it was here at Castile Gandolfo. This was a true blessing for popes, spiritually, mentally, and physically, all those who came before me and who would come after me.

"Holy Father, may I speak to you?"

"Of course, Daniel. Did you talk with the young man?"

"We cried together when I told him of your offer to put him on the team so that we could be together. He said yes, and we really are one or two men short to allow for sick calls, vacations, and extra needs. Also, in light of the trip to America and the possibility of another attempt on your life, it wouldn't hurt to have a couple more good men."

"Very well; tell him to come over. He has a job working for you. He can share your new suite, but you will have to make it appear that he is nothing but a roommate. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Holy Father. I can't believe you are so generous and loving as to care about me this

way.”

“Pay me back by keeping William and me alive! By the way, what is his name?”

“Eric Banyon.”

Daniel kissed my hands and ran off to call his policeman again.

“Well, that felt good; I hope it works out for all of us. That will give Daniel six men besides himself and that should be sufficient, I would hope. Shall we go in? I feel the mosquitoes coming on.”

“Your only scheduled duty here is the Sunday blessing of the people,” William said with a smile. “Other than that, your time is free.”

“I think I will celebrate Mass in the village church unannounced once in a while. I like being with the people as a priest occasionally. It is good for my soul and good for their faith. I don’t want to live like a prisoner here, beautiful as it is.”

“As you wish. But please follow advice from Daniel on this issue. Agreed?”

“Agreed. Now let’s go see if we can get anything on the television that we can understand.”

The next morning Daniel told us that it was all set. Eric would give his two-weeks’ notice and make arrangements to fly here to take up his position. As an afterthought, I asked if Eric was

catholic and was told that he was. It wasn't a requirement on my part, but it sure helped in many situations.

Later that day I got my first financial briefing since the bulls had been issued. Donations were down in the Bible Belt part of the United States and up in liberal areas such as California, New York, and New Jersey. When it was tallied up, there was a slight increase in donations over the same period last year. The real test would be the annual Peter's pence collection, which was taken up by parishes throughout the world to help run the Church. If anything might draw a protest, it would be that collection, due to be taken up on June twenty-ninth, the following week. I would not have to wait long for a verdict. Collections totaling around the sixty-million-dollar mark had been counted over the past few years. I would be happy to receive the same without any increase.

William and I finally had some spare time to catch up on reading. There simply was no time for it at the Vatican. Here at Castile Gandolfo I had the time. I was in a different world rereading *The Screwtape Letters*, by C. S. Lewis when Daniel asked to see me.

"What is it, Dan?"

"Holy Father, we have had a call from the FBI in Washington. The gunman was traced to a record of hits for the Mafia. The FBI believe

Dupree was hired by them. It appears that the conservative wing of the Church and the conservative right of the political world in the U.S. are the ones that tried to end your papacy early. Arrests have been made, but no one is talking. I assume they know that if they talk they will be under a Mafia death sentence."

"If the Mafia was merely supplying the gunman, why would they continue the attempt to kill me? What purpose would it serve? There is no profit in it unless they are being paid to carry it out."

"Unfortunately, Holy Father, that is what the FBI believes. Your enemies in the states simply put a contract out on you with the Italian Mafia. The price being offered for your life is five million dollars."

"The question then becomes, why?"

"Your proposed changes to the Church's stand on homosexuality. The right wing in America is rabid over this topic and they see you as removing a great barrier in the way of the gay community. The Church and Scripture have always been key allies of the right in preventing equal rights for gays and other minorities. If you are killed, a new pope will probably reverse your bull. They have killed presidents in the past; what's another pope?"

"Contact the Italian authorities and coordinate

intelligence with them. See what they have in the way of rumors on a contract on me."

William was not pleased and it showed. "We need to go back to the Vatican where it is safer. We can't take the chance of you being isolated out here!"

"No. I will not alter our summer residence because of these jackals of hell. Daniel, do whatever you have to do to maintain safety for me and everyone else here. Call up the commandant of the Swiss Guard and tell him we need more troops to protect against a verified threat. I will not be run out of town by the mob."

"I'll begin immediately to tighten up all security here and get the extra troops. You need to rethink your plans to celebrate Mass across the street though; it takes you out into public."

When Daniel left, I lost my temper. "Do you believe this fucking shit? I reverse eight centuries of Church hatred and discrimination and the lunatics of the world try to kill me, the successor to St. Peter! They are no true Christians and certainly not Catholics. Do we have a way to get a message to the Mafia in Sicily?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

"I want to send them a message. As soon as Daniel comes back find out if he knows a way to get a message to the *capo di tutti capi*. I'm going to the chapel to cool off."

When I came back from chapel, I told William to come to the study. "I want you to draw up an order of de facto excommunication for anyone involved in a plot in to assassinate or harm in any way the pope or any member of the College of Cardinals or the Synod of Bishops. I want it published within one day of any meeting set up with the Mafia."

"Speaking of that, I have asked Daniel to contact the Italian authorities for that information. He is trying to get it now. What will you say if such a meeting is arranged? You take some risk just meeting with the boss of bosses."

"Do you have a better suggestion? Do we rely upon luck and protection from the Lord? Or does God expect us to use the gift of our minds to figure a way out of this madness? We must try a different route. What would you have me do for my entire papacy: duck, cover, and run?"

A knock on the door came, and Daniel entered. "I have the information you wanted. The Italians were curious as to why you wanted it. The big boss is Salvatore Morelia of Sicily. He is known as a cunning businessman but ruthless and violent when the need arises. He is not someone you should be rubbing shoulders with or meeting alone."

"Contact this man and see if he will meet me in Naples within the week. Find a villa belonging to

a friend of the Church who will forget what he sees.”

“Very well. If you are sure you want to do this thing, I will begin calling now.”

William left the room and Daniel shared his feelings also. “Holy Father, I know what you are trying to do, but you also make yourself more human to this man and I’m not sure that is good.”

“Daniel, you cannot protect William and me from a Mafia assassin here in Italy. I would become a prisoner in the Vatican and we have already seen how that worked out for John Paul the first. The only way is to meet with this man and see what will it cost the Church to stop this contract. We know it costs roughly two million dollars to conduct a short conclave to elect a new pope. I doubt I can appeal to this man’s humanity so I must appeal to the satanic nature of the beast. You will arrange any security that you can for the meeting, no Italians involved.”

“Yes, Holy Father. I will begin the search for a suitable villa.”

It was all rather depressing to know that I had to go through all of this to simply bring the Church into the twenty-first century. Now I had to meet with one of the most vicious organizations on the face of the planet in order to secure the chair of Peter. I was actually more worried about

William than I was about myself. Without William in my life, I would be lost.

William came back into the room with a frown on his face. "Believe it or not, I got through to him. He has agreed to the meeting next Tuesday. I told him I would give him the location once I talked with you. He wanted to know why you were requesting this meeting and I told him that it was a private matter between the two of you. At first he wanted you to come to Palermo and I said it would draw too much attention. So, where do we meet this man?"

"Daniel is trying to find a villa. It must be very private and we should arrive incognito. It will just be you, me, Daniel and his men, and no one else. Tell the household that we are taking a day trip to see the sights and will be back for dinner."

It was now late and we decided to take this subject up again in the morning. I said goodnight to Daniel and we went up to the bedroom as a van carrying six more Swiss Guard of the suited type with modern firearms arrived.

Daniel found a villa that overlooked the coast and had restricted access. The location was communicated to the Don and arrangements were made with the owner to be gone while we were there. Tuesday morning, we rose early, dressed in simple black cassocks without any sign of rank on them, and headed for Naples. It was a little over

an hour-and-a-half drive and we made it there in plenty of time for the meeting at noon. Upon arrival, we took the opportunity to look around the beautiful city of Naples and its grand churches, but we did not get out of the van until we went to the villa. The van was parked in a garage so that the Vatican plates could not be seen and we went inside. Precisely at 11:55, two cars arrived in front of the villa and Salvatore Morelia exited the backseat along with seven bodyguards. Daniel and his men tensed up at the sight of so many men coming toward the villa.

I took a seat in the living room, where refreshments had been set up. The doorbell rang and Morelia was admitted along with five of his men. Two remained outside looking after the cars and guarding the entrance to the villa. William showed the don into my presence and I got up to greet him. Morelia was at least nominally Catholic and therefore paid his respects by kissing my ring. William translated the Italian until Salvatore broke into English.

"Holy Father, it is an honor to meet you and I am happy to have this chance to sit and talk with you."

"I thank you, Don Morelia, for coming all the way from Palermo; it is very kind of you to make such a trip."

"It was my pleasure, Holiness. What is it that I

can do for the Church?"

"You are aware there was an attempt to kill me in Washington, DC, on my recent visit there, are you not?"

"We heard and prayed for you; it was a terrible thing. To shoot the pope is unforgiveable."

"Agreed. Information has come to us that the gunman was associated with your interests and was in fact an employee of a family. This is distressing to us."

"No, it cannot be so! We would have no part in any attempt to hurt you, Your Holiness. Impossible!"

"We have further information that a contract has been put on me here in Italy by the same elements that tried to assassinate me in America. We understand that the contract price is five million dollars."

"That is a lie, Holy Father. Who tells you such a thing? I will personally make him tell the truth!"

"That would be the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"Well, you cannot believe a thing the FBI says; they have been our sworn enemies for years. They lie in an attempt to damage us. It is all lies, Holy Father. You must believe me."

"Don Morelia, do you value your soul and your potential place in heaven?"

"Yes, of course; why would you ask such a

thing?"

"William, the document please."

William brought out the order of excommunication and placed it before me on the table. "Don Morelia, this is an order of excommunication that states that anyone who harms or attempts to harm the pope, any Cardinal or bishop, is de facto excommunicated for eternity. I have just signed it and it is now official." I returned the document back to William as Morelia's jaw dropped.

"You could do a great favor to anyone who is intending to carry out the contract on my life by saving their immortal soul. They would then be in your debt, Don Morelia."

"I can assure you, Holy Father, that if I become aware of such a contract, I will make sure that it is stopped. What can the Church do in return for me for such a favor?"

"Why, the Church can do many things for you. We can pray for forgiveness of your sins and bury you in consecrated ground when the sad day comes of your departure from this earth. Are these not great things in return for your service to the Church?"

As he wiggled and squirmed, he replied meekly, "Yes Holy Father, they are of great importance. May I ask who these men are that are here with you? They do not look like Swiss

Guards nor are they Italian authorities.”

“These men are part of a private Vatican Secret Service charged with my protection. They are highly skilled from various backgrounds and do not report to the Swiss Guard, but directly to me.”

Morelia smiled as he looked each of the men over. “I have a feeling that the College of Cardinals elected a wolf as pope when they thought they were electing a sheep.”

“You could say that. Do I have your word of honor on the Blessed Mother that you will do this service for the Church and your soul?”

“You do, Holy Father. But I must also warn you that not all of those in the business of doing such wicked things work for me or my brothers. So you must still be careful.”

“Thank you for that advice and thank you for coming all this way to meet with me. I shall say a prayer for you tonight for your kindness.”

As we watched the Mob get back into their cars and leave, I turned to Daniel. “So, did we get photographs and the recording?”

“We sure did. The hidden mic picked up the conversation and the tiny camera took everyone’s photo.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here and go back to Castile Gandolfo.”

As we drove back to the summer retreat, I couldn’t help but be amazed at the wide array of

people I had to deal with as pope, from presidents to mafia dons and their gunmen.

The days began to fly by. Eric arrived from the United States and was added to my security force and to Daniel's bedroom. I saw an immediate change in Daniel as he exhibited a new thirst for life. Eric was cute and younger than Daniel; they made a good-looking couple *and got along wonderfully*.

As I lay in bed with William the second night after Eric arrived, I wondered aloud how many times Eric and Daniel had made love in that time. We talked about being young and in love and what that did to one's sex drive when all of a sudden an alarm went off, shattering the peace of the house, bathing the grounds in light and sound. William jumped out of bed, threw on pants and a shirt, and went to the bedroom door. He opened it and peeked outside into the hallway. The two Swiss Guards were on duty as normal but now with their weapons at the ready.

"Brian, what do you think we should do?"

"We should stay right where we are. That's why there is a security force; so that they can respond to such incidents. Now relock the door and get back over here. In fact, let's go into your bedroom and lock that door also." As we went into William's room, he reached into a dresser and pulled out a gun. "What the hell are you doing

with that, trying to get us killed?"

"Oh be quiet. I've taken lessons from Daniel and I have gotten quite good with it. Now sit on the bed until we know what's going on."

For once I let William order me about. Finally his cell phone rang, and Daniel was on the other end. After talking with him for a while, he put the gun back into the drawer and I got up off the bed. He hung up and looked at me. "They caught someone who actually managed to scale the wall and lower himself down onto the ground on this side. He was armed. Daniel is questioning him along with the Swiss Guard. The local police have also been called."

"Was that document on excommunication promulgated yet?"

"No, it was going out with this week's dispatches from the Vatican."

"Get it out tomorrow. Let's get that thing published for whatever good it might do us."

We went back into my bedroom, where I got dressed, and then we were escorted to where the prisoner was being questioned. He was a ruddy-looking man who looked like he lived on the street, not someone likely to be employed by the "Black Hand." When the man saw me his eyes got large and he started babbling in Italian so fast that I couldn't understand him.

"He was not aware you were in residence here.

It was his aim to merely steal from the house, *Daniel translated for us.*"

"Then why was he carrying a gun?"

The question was translated and put to the man and his response was translated back into English.

"He heard that there were guard dogs that prowled the grounds and he wanted to be able to protect himself from attack."

"Tell him he was lucky he wasn't shot tonight."

"He is very well aware of that fact, as he was cornered by seven armed men," Daniel replied.

"Well, I'm going back to bed. Good work, Daniel, and the same to the rest of the security team."

William and I got back into bed and tried to fall asleep. "Did you notice that Eric was right at Daniel's side?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. I suppose that's another good thing about that arrangement; Daniel has immediate backup if something happens."

The Italian police arrived to charge the burglar and we finally fell asleep in each other's arms.

About a month later, I invited Daniel and Eric to have dinner with William and me. It turned out to be a very enjoyable night; two gay couples laughing and talking about things that had nothing to do with our jobs, just like normal people. I could tell they were falling for each

other. Many sentences now included the word “we”.

“Well, we have about another six weeks here and then we return to the Vatican, where there is a lot more formality and less privacy. So, enjoy yourselves as much as possible now,” I said.

Eric smiled and said that he could deal with anything as long as he was with Daniel. Daniel blushed and told him to be quiet. William and I felt like the parents of a proud little gay couple.

“Why don’t you two take off for a weekend and enjoy yourselves? Check into a hotel and live it up. What do you think about that idea, Daniel?”

“Well, I don’t think I should leave you, Holy Father. I would be worried sick.”

“That is why there are six men in the unit besides yourself, so that the guys can get away when they want to. Besides, we have an increased presence of the Swiss Guard; I’ll be fine. Why don’t you take off this weekend and tour Pompei? Have fun, forget about me and security for a weekend; I insist. Once we go back to the Vatican, it will be more difficult for you to get away.”

“Okay, Holy Father, you win. It sounds like a great idea. We’ll leave early Friday afternoon and be back before dinner on Sunday. Is that all right?”

“Consider it settled. I hope you both have a good time.”

In the final days of our residence at Castile Gandolfo, the weather began to break a little and cooler temperatures were the rule rather than the exception. It was also a hint that time was getting short and that soon we would be back in Rome. Things on the security front calmed down considerably as we enjoyed the end of the season in relative calm.

"William, who says we can't come back here on the occasional weekend? Why have all the previous popes only used this place in the summer?"

"It would interfere with the tradition of the pope celebrating Sunday Mass and the blessing from the window at St. Peter's every Wednesday as well."

"Then how about two days during the week? I'm not saying every week, but maybe once a month."

"There is no reason why we can't do exactly that. Are you starting another new tradition?"

"Yes. I see no reason why I have to stay in Rome all the time when this beautiful spot is half an hour away. Wednesday is the papal audience, so let's plan on Sunday evening until Tuesday evening. How's that sound?"

"That would work fine. Say the last week of every month?"

"Except for Christmas and Easter weeks. That

will give us a break from the routine of the Vatican once a month, and that can only be a good thing."

The days of peace and quiet came to an end, and it was time to head back to Rome. I took notice of how professional Daniel and Eric were with each other when they were on duty. Only the night before, I found them in a passionate embrace in Daniel's bedroom with the door open. I had smiled, quietly closed the door, and returned to William.

The short procession of cars escorted by the Italian police left the summer residence. The nuns of the staff waved goodbye, and off to Rome we went. The trip was short, and before I knew it we were cruising through the gates of the Vatican to the salute of the Swiss Guard.

Chapter Nineteen

Present, Past, And Future

All of my personal staff was waiting at the papal apartments and, after a lot of fuss, we settled back into the routine of the Vatican. Daniel and Eric were relocated to the suite of guest rooms, resulting in smiles from both of them. To mark my return, a Mass attended by most of the staff of the Vatican was celebrated at St. Peter's. This was followed by a long visit to my offices on the second floor to attend to personal matters such as the appointment of new bishops. The furor over the changes that I had instituted in the Church was beginning to die down and most of the parishes were carrying out the new policy with only minor resistance. I was glad because I intended to address the role of women in the Church next.

For too long women had been treated like gay people had, as second-class members of the

Church. I was going to remind the world's faithful just who Jesus was close to besides the apostles. Who were the first people to see the risen Lord? Of the three people at the foot of the cross, two were women. Women played an important role in the life of Jesus and that role was not reflected in the order of the Church. The call for women in the priesthood had merit and, much like celibacy, the prohibition was an invention of the Church and not God. My next planned change was sure to create an earthquake far greater than that of the role of gay people in the world. I was up to the challenge of removing the limits on women that restricted them to the role of nuns and administrators, and I had the full support of the man most important to me, William.

Three days after our return to the Vatican, Daniel came to me after dinner with an envelope. I was with William in my study going over some documents related to cardinals when my head of security found me.

"Holy Father, an envelope was delivered to the Vatican by overnight courier marked for your eyes only. There is no return address, which is quite curious as a return address is required for posting. As there might have been something harmful in the envelope, I opened it to inspect the contents. Inside are three photographs that you might find disturbing."

"Photographs? What are the photographs of?"

"They show three men hanging from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The three are obviously dead. The writing on the back of each photograph reads 'They are no longer a threat'."

"What does that mean?"

Daniel handed over the photographs to me. "All three men have been identified. The first one is Jacob Dunlevy, a multi-millionaire conservative from California. The second is Edward Skorsy, another millionaire from Oregon who made his fortune in the airplane business, and the third is Arnold Remblin, the head of an ultra-conservative think tank in Washington, DC. All three of these men have made public remarks criticizing you and your decisions on Church policy. As a matter of fact, Remblin called for your removal as pope."

"What do you make of this? It's obviously not coincidence."

"If you recall, one of the men involved in the Vatican bank scandal during Pope John Paul the first's short-lived reign was found hanging underneath the London Bridge. It was assumed then that the Mafia carried out that execution. This could be Morelia's way of telling you that he has taken care of those who sought to end your papacy. It would have been a very simple thing for him to find out who took the contract out on

you and make sure that everyone got the message you were off limits."

"What are the police saying about these homicides?"

"The bodies were reported by a man on a boat. The police spent over three hours examining the scene before even bringing the bodies up. The fact that this was a triple homicide brought national attention to the crime. To date, all the FBI can say is that the three knew one another, had meetings and talked to one another via phone at least twice a week. There are very few clues as to the actual murders themselves. All three men were in San Francisco at the same time for different reasons. However, they were all staying at the Four Seasons Hotel. Security tapes show them leaving together and never coming back. Nothing else is known at this time."

"I wonder if these were the only men responsible for the attack on you or if there were more," said William.

"Well, if there were others involved in a conspiracy to kill the Holy Father, I'm sure they got the message from these murders," replied Daniel.

"It's my feeling that since these men were found hanging from underneath a bridge, as was Roberto Calvi of the Vatican Bank scandal, a clear message has been sent. The message was for those

trying to change the papacy, but also for us. It tells us that the Mafia can protect as well as destroy when it is in their interests to do so. Even though the British concluded that Calvi's death was a suicide, we know it wasn't. Calvi's body was weighed down by fourteen pounds of bricks with his hands tied behind his back. He was clearly executed and I dare say he was alive when he went off the bridge," I said.

"Well, we know that his role in the Vatican Bank scandal is undisputed. He was at the center of the entire operation, which revealed how corrupt even Church officials were in that matter. They had to shut him up because he knew names and dates that would have kept the prosecutor busy to this day," said Daniel.

"It really is remarkable how the past affects the present. The corruption of those years is still felt today. How many other schemes has the Vatican been involved in that we will never know about? What skeleton will pop up next to shake our world? Look how the Vatican's role in providing a lifeline for escaping Nazis took years to surface. Fortunately some of those Nazis were brought to justice, but others, like Dr. Joseph Mengele, managed to escape justice altogether. They literally cheated the hangman. This is what happens when men give in to their passion for money and power. Many high-ranking officials of

the Vatican were corrupted and ceased to serve God in favor of worshipping mammon. We truly have a lot of work to do to change the culture of the Church here in Rome and around the world. We must instill love and respect for our fellow human beings where it has been all but forgotten. Life, that precious gift from God, is now as disposable as a paper towel. It is our responsibility to do what we can in the name of God to correct this. The fact that forces of the intolerant right were prepared to kill me tells me we are set upon the right path. I see no need to change our course."

"I've had enough drama for the day. I think I'll turn in," William said, and yawned.

"I agree. Are you and Eric settling in, Daniel?"

"Yes, Holy Father, we are very comfortable. Not to mention happy, thanks to you."

"Good. I will see you in the morning then."

As silence fell over the Vatican again, I got into bed and into the arms of my lover. What a strange and sometimes horrible world we lived in, where not even the Church lived up to what was expected of it. The question was, how far could I correct the course of the Church in the future without destroying her? I was determined to tackle the issue of women's role in the church, but after that, what should I set my sights on? Should it be world hunger? War? Disease? These were all

issues that the churches of the world should be engaged in solving, though few were. Somehow the Church in the universal sense of the word had gotten off track and away from its intended purpose. St. Paul would not recognize the Church that he had started any more than Jesus would. As the current, and God willing, long-serving pope, I would have the chance to do something about it.

"William, we have a lot of work to do; you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, but with God's help we can get it all done. If you can run the devil out of St. Peter's, then I think you can do almost anything. The church needs to be brought into the modern era, kicking and screaming, if necessary, and I will be by your side to give whatever aid I can. The only other thing I can promise you is my love."

"I love you. With your love and the support of God, I can do anything."

About the Author

John Simpson is a Vietnam Era Veteran, former Police Officer of the Year, a Federal Agent, a Federal Magistrate, an armed bodyguard to Saudi Royalty, a senior Federal Government executive, and recipient of awards from the Vice President of the United States and the Secretary of Treasury.

John feels that for too long fiction writers neglected gay men. John writes entertaining, enjoyable, and enthralling fiction centered on the lives and lifestyles of gay men. John allows his readers to see life through gay men's' eyes. And just like real life, John's characters have active and exciting sex lives. John calls on his broad personal and professional experience in writing gay erotica. John is author of numerous full-length novels available through Dreamspinner Press, and several short stories in Alyson Books anthologies. John has written magazine articles for gay and straight audiences alike.

John lives with his partner of 35 years and their three Scottish Terriers. John is highly involved with the Church, specifically seeking to repair rifts between Christendom and the gay community.

John wishes to extend a very special thanks to his many female readers. He appreciates and loves the fact women enjoy male/male erotica, and he thanks you for your past and continued support. He hopes to never disappoint you, and always leave you wanting more!