

THE CODEX

T.D. FREIBERG

PROLOGUE

Wadi Rum Desert, Southern Jordan
Sunday, June 1st 1947

OUTSIDERS would discern a flat, desolate desert stretching in all directions for as far as the eye could see. Khalil al-Subaie saw an ever-changing sea that ebbed, flowed, and crested with the prevailing winds. Looking north and east, over the wire fence he was mending, his sun-wrinkled eyes caught the outline of Mount Um Dami rising above waves of desert heat.

Khalil took a deep breath through a hawk-shaped nose tanned over eighteen years to a rough tobacco bronze. Binding the last of the broken wires, he detected minute traces of sulfur contaminating the bone-dry air. These were particles from diesel emissions. The port city of Aqaba and the Red Sea lie due west, fifteen kilometers over the horizon. "The stench of civilization," he muttered to the camels in the pen. There were no roads in this part of the desert but he had no doubt that his father's brother would find the clan. *A Bedouin always finds his way in the desert.*

Khalil heard his name being called from the front of the tent. Half the size of a basketball court, his father's black goat-hair tent was larger than his Bedouin peers. Tahnoon al-Subaie's position as the tribe's teacher, his wealth of eighty camels, and his seat on the tribal council bestowed a status that would never be deduced from his dry, weathered skin and hands gnarled from decades of rope burns.

The eldest of seven children, Khalil's ankle-length white *throb* billowed as he rushed to his father's summons. "Yes, father?"

"There are three hours before sunset," Tahnoon said, looking at the sun's elevation. "Take Zayed and two camels; gather as much firewood as you can. We will be cooking all day tomorrow for the festival of Eid al-Fitr. Keep to yourselves. There are reports of strangers in the desert."

"Bandits?" Khalil asked.

"Men who profess to be our brothers but their actions profane the Profit's words. Evil men."

"Shall I bring my rifle?"

Tahnoon thought for a moment. "No...these men will not stop you for firewood. Now hurry."

Collecting his twelve-year-old brother, the boys dashed to the makeshift wire enclosure behind the tent. Their goatskin shoes, made by one of their sisters, left only a fleeting impression in the fluid sand.

Both boys knew that this was a special occasion for their father. Tahnoon's brother, Aamir, had left the tribe thirty years ago, found his way into Israel, and become a carpenter in Be'er Sheva. Now married with two sons, he was making this pilgrimage to his homeland to celebrate the Eid al-Fitr with his brother. This was to be a joyous reunion for the entire family and probably the last time the two men would see each other.

Each boy had a personal saddle, a simple wooden frame constructed under the guidance of an elder,

topped with a saddle blanket woven by a grandmother. Khalil was first to mount. "I know a place where the wind has blown piles of dead wood against the canyon's walls."

"Where?" Zayed asked. "What canyon?"

"The Valley of Caves." The older brother goaded his camel to be first out of the enclosure. As the camel increased its pace, Khalil's white *kufeya* headdress flapped off the back of his neck. The beast lumbered forward, oblivious to the sand's 138-degree surface temperature.

"No! Father has forbidden us to go there. It is a place of the dead." Zayed cinched the bottom strap of his saddle and hurried to catch up with his energetic older brother.

"No one has lived there for a thousand years," Khalil shouted over his shoulder. "We can get all the wood we need at the valley's mouth."

Thirty minutes due east of their nomadic home, the boys found themselves at the entrance of a towering sandstone and granite gorge. The 200-meter high walls flanking both sides of the kilometer long chasm were speckled with ancient rock paintings, graffiti, and caves. "See," Khalil said, pointing to mounds of wood piled on ledges cut into the sandstone. "More wood than we could possibly carry."

Zayed looked into the canyon. "I do not like this place. The wood is three meters above the desert's floor. The wind did not blow it there."

"Quit being a *Kisich*. I can reach the ledge and throw the wood down to you." Khalil charged into the valley leaving Zayed with no option but to follow.

Positioning his camel next to a sandstone overhang, Khalil stood on his saddle and heaved himself up onto a narrow ledge. He immediately began throwing armfuls of dead wood to the sand below.

Zayed stacked the wood into four bundles, which he tied securely with rope. He left a loop in the middle of each bundle to hook over the frame of their saddles. "Stop Khalil. We have enough. Come down."

"Wait, there is a cave up here. The wood was hiding its entrance."

"Come down. It is getting late. We must get this wood back before nightfall. Khalil? Do you hear me?" A scream echoed from inside the cave. "Khalil, are you okay? Khalil!" Zayed backed away from the sandstone wall to get a better look but could not see anything.

"I hit my foot on this inside the cave." Khalil held up a chunk of rusted metal. "It is heavy." He dropped the object to the sandy floor under the ledge where it landed with a solid thump.

Smaller than his saddle, Zayed struggled to lift it with one hand. "Arrggh! This is heavy...and old." He used both hands to pull it out of the sand. "It looks like a lump of metal plates, covered with rust." He spit on the top plate and rubbed it with his fingers. "Look!"

Khalil angled himself over the ledge and dropped twice his body height to the ground. "What?"

"Writing. There is writing on the metal. I cannot read it, but I think this is a book."

"Look at these gouges," Khalil said, pointing to four gashes on the right side of the object. "If it is a book, it was sealed with rings but they have been ripped out so the book could be opened." Khalil withdrew a knife from his sash and tried to force it between the rusted plates.

"Stop," Zayed yelled, pulling the blanket from his saddle. "You will scratch the metal. Father will know what to do with it. Help me lift it up here." The boys maneuvered the relic between the cross members of the frame that formed Zayed's saddle.

"Father will be pleased with all this dry wood," Khalil said, throwing a blanket over the find. "What are you looking at?"

Zayed was staring blankly at the canyon's opposing rim. "I saw a reflection. I think someone is watching us."

"We should leave." Khalil helped his younger brother mount his camel and handed him two bundles of wood, which he draped on either side of his saddle. Fastening the remaining two stacks of wood on his camel, Khalil mounted his beast and prodded it toward the setting sun. As they reached the canyon's exit, a horseman dressed in black blocked their way. Khalil shouted the traditional Bedouin greeting, "*Salaam Alaikum!*—Peace be with you!"

"Give me the object you found," the black rider commanded. His dark beard thrust forward from his jaw like a dagger.

The boys stopped and looked at each other. "We have only firewood," Khalil said.

The man aimed his rifle at Zayed. "I ask you one last time. Give me the object you found."

Both boys dismounted and retrieved the artifact from under Zayed's saddle. They dropped it in the sand and took a step back.

A shot echoed off the canyon's walls. Blood splattered over the metal object. Zayed flew backward; his eyes wide open in the fading sun. The sand around his chest turned a brownish-crimson.

Khalil turned just as the second shot shattered his spine.



Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, Italy
Friday, June 1st, Sixty Years Later

HISTORY is perceived differently in Rome where residents of the Eternal City regard anything built after 1600 AD as new construction. Time's passage, however, is relentless. It leaves an indelible mark on marble and man. At fifty-seven, Professor Thomas Constantine's silver-grey hair had expanded to a uniform mane of white. The change had occurred over the last six months—the most harrowing period of his entire life.

Constantine approached Grand Chancellor Daniel Vaughn's personal assistant at her desk in the Institute's business office, cupped his hand near her ear, and whispered, "Am I in trouble?"

"You are always in some kind of trouble," Ciana Bianchi quipped. "How is Nadia?"

"She is coming home! I am flying to Switzerland tomorrow afternoon and we will be taking the Trenitalia Night Train back. We will arrive at Rome Termini Station Sunday morning around nine thirty."

"I will pick you up at the station."

"We can take a taxi."

"Nonsense! I insist."

Constantine appreciated the offer. Eighteen months ago, when he was still a priest, he had helped Ciana through a difficult period when her husband succumbed to cancer. "Thank you. You are most kind."

"The beard becomes you by the way. It makes you look like a distinguished professor."

"I am still getting used to it. I keep it trimmed just enough to cover the burns from the brasserie explosion. Now what did I do to merit a visit to the Chancellor's office?"

"I really do not know. It is all very secretive." She motioned for Constantine to follow as she went to the massive mahogany door of the Chancellor's office, knocked, and went in. Seconds later, the door opened and Ciana made a sweeping gesture with her arm. As Constantine passed, she whispered, "He is in a particularly foul mood."

Constantine forced a positive smile. He had been at Nadia's bedside in her hospital room in Bern when Ciana called with news of this meeting. That was Wednesday, and it was not a request. He had arrived by train late last night and had intended on spending the day cleaning their apartment and grocery shopping.

"I cannot drink this—" Chancellor Vaughn said in a menacing tone as he forced down a sip of reddish colored liquid. He pointed to one of two leather chairs facing his desk. "I made the mistake of bringing my wife to my last medical consultation. I can no longer have my morning espresso, my after work wine,

or my late night brandy.”

“She has your best interest at heart,” Constantine chuckled. He had never known the Chancellor to kowtow to anyone. “After twenty-eight years of living a monastic life, I am learning the rules of living with a woman. I am often confused.”

“Forgive my self-obsession,” Vaughn said, putting his glass down. “How is Nadia doing?”

“She is doing well enough that I am travelling to Bern tomorrow to bring her home. There are still some bullet fragments near her spine causing back pain, but she should recover fully.”

“I am happy to hear that. Is there anything that I can do to help?”

“You have done more than enough by granting my leave-of-absence. Traveling back and forth to Switzerland these last two weeks has been draining, but I expect to resume my teaching responsibility once Nadia is home. I assume this is the reason for today’s conference?”

“Rector Gianto called me Wednesday to request this meeting and specifically asked that you be here.”

“Am I being dismissed?” Constantine assumed that the Rector had a stick up his backside over the paid leave that he had been granted to be with his recuperating fiancé. Gianto had met Nadia prior to the shooting. His body language made it clear that he disapproved of their twenty year age difference.

Both of Vaughn’s eyebrows lifted. “Of course not! Why would you think that?”

“When Gianto was Vice Rector, he was highly critical of my work and my teaching methods.”

“The Chaldean Tablets?”

“Among others. He was also less than supportive when I renounced my vows.”

“I really do not know the reason for today’s meeting, but I assure you that your position is not in jeopardy.”

The chancellor’s desk phone rang. “Yes? Send him in.” Vaughn pushed his chair back and stood. “Rector Gianto is here.”

Vaughn came from around his desk and extended his hand. “*Magnifico Rettore.*”

Constantine caught a fleeting grimace wash across the chancellor’s face as the two men shook hands. “Congratulations on your appointment,” Constantine added, extending his right hand. He kept his palm up just enough to hide the burn scars on the back of his hand.

“*Grazie. Grazie,*” Gianto said, tendering Constantine a soppy, milquetoast handshake. His thinning hair, pale complexion, and watery brown eyes reflected his Italian heritage, but sour-puckered lips made him look perpetually morose.

“May I offer you tea or coffee?” Vaughn gestured to the leather chairs in front of his desk.

“No, no thank you. Something...unusual has come our way,” Rector Gianto said, turning toward Constantine. “It concerns Father...er...Constantine. How are you holding up?”

My fiancé is doing quite well. Thank you for asking. “I look forward to resuming my normal schedule here at the institute as early as next Monday.”

“And we will be delighted to have you back,” Gianto said, “but I...cough...was referring to your ah, mental and physical health.”

Constantine understood the real question. “I have not had any visions or taken a drink since before Nadia’s...incident.”

Vaughn leaned forward, his eyes boring into Gianto. “Professor Constantine is the finest Professor of Hermeneutics that this institute has ever had. He learned Hebrew to read the Old Testament, Greek to study the New Testament and has mastered Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. What is all this about?”

Gianto shrunk into his seat and lowered his voice as if to keep ghosts in the room from listening. “I received a phone call earlier this week from *Signor Elkann.*”

"John Philip Elkann, the grandson of Gianni Agnelli, the industrialist?" Vaughn asked.

"Yes. In addition to owning Fiat, Signor Elkann oversees the Agnelli Family Trust. He called me because he uncovered a religious artifact that his grandfather purchased just prior to his death. The senior Agnelli acquired the item with the intention of gifting it to the Vatican Museum, but he passed away before he could have it authenticated. Signor Elkann has requested that the Biblical Institute, and Constantine in particular, is to authenticate the relic."

"Me? How does someone like Signor Elkann even know of me?" Constantine asked with widening eyes.

"In addition to the family's vast automotive holdings," Gianni continued, "the trust owns the *Corriere della Sera*, the newspaper that broke the story about you saving the Pope's life. The paper's editor, an Antonio Alberti, recommended that you, and only you, perform the authentication."

Constantine had given up disputing that he had any involvement with saving the Pope's life. He had resigned himself to living with the unwanted notoriety. "What is this object that I am to authenticate?"

Gianto leaned even closer and whispered, "The Wadi Rum Codex."

"From the Jordanian desert region?" Constantine asked.

"Allegedly the last words of our Savior prior to the Crucifixion." The Rector pointed his finger at Vaughn for emphasis. "This is the most significant undertaking in the Institute's history. It is imperative that every aspect of our authentication be above reproach. Signor Agnelli paid a million euros for this artifact and the Pontifical Institute has the responsibility for its safekeeping while it is being authenticated."

"The old man paid that kind of money before having the book validated?" Vaughn asked.

"Signor Agnelli was no fool. This Codex, twelve lead/copper plates sealed with four metal rings, has a bloody history. Signor Elkann told me that two children were murdered to obtain this book. It was sold to a private collector in Egypt for a pittance. When that man died, it ended up in the hands of—"

The Institute's fire alarm klaxon sounded. An instant later, the phone on Vaughn's desk rang. "*Mi scusi*," Vaughn said, picking up his phone. "What is happening?"

"We just received a bomb threat," Ciana said in a highly agitated voice. The *polizia* are on the way. We must vacate the building at once."

Vaughn cradled his phone. "The Institute has just received a bomb threat! I apologize, but we must leave the building." He dashed to the back of his office where he closed the door on the Institute's safe, spun the dial, and hurried back to Rector Gianto and Constantine. "This way." Vaughn collected his suit coat and ushered everyone out a side door that emptied into the Institute's main hallway.

Rome was cooking under an early heat wave. The three men followed a throng of students and faculty through the parking lot onto the cobblestone street. Constantine felt sweat drip from his brow. He had dropped seven kilos due to a daily bicycle regimen with Nadia but had gained some back in the last two weeks. Traveling back and forth to the hospital in Bern, he had spent too much time in the train's dining car.

Another drop of sweat ran down his nose. Constantine unbuttoned his shirt's top button and loosened his tie. The stiff collar chafed against the still healing burns on his neck causing them to itch.

The *polizia* had already blocked off both ends of the thoroughfare. The trill of a dozen arriving sirens blended with the klaxon's scream to create a surrealistic wail. Ciana, standing with two uniformed officers, pointed to the group. One of the officers came forward. "Are one of you the head of the Institute?"

"I am," Vaughn responded.

Constantine was amused to hear Rector Gianto grunt an audible, "Harrumph."

"Follow me. We have a command center set up over here." The officer pointed to a blue and white striped Land Rover.

Louder sirens filled the air as two IVECO armored 4x4's made their way through the crowd. A dozen *carabinieri* in full camouflage beige combat dress, heavy flack vests, and assault rifles sprung out of the first vehicle and began herding people across the street.

The second 4x4 stopped in front of the command center. The driver jumped out, opened the passenger side door, and saluted the man stepping out. In the rear of the assault vehicle, a heavily armored gate dropped down and a man slid to the ground wearing a blast suit resembling an astronaut's space suit. Every part of his body was covered except his hands.

A *carabiniere* followed the spaceman out of the back of the vehicle. "Luther. *Hier! Komm!*" A large dog with a padded vest around its midsection jumped to the ground.

Constantine, who was standing closest to the armored vehicle, suppressed a snicker. He knew that all Italian police dogs were trained with German commands; his chortle was over a dog named Luther sniffing around a Catholic institution.

"I am Colonel Gallo," the arriving officer said. His shoulder epaulet displayed three silver stars over a silver castle. "What is the situation?"

Constantine, standing in back of the policeman who had summoned Vaughn, noticed heavy black bags under the Colonel's eyes and deeply cut furrows in his forehead. The man wore a face of someone at least a decade older than his actual age.

"Telephone bomb threat," the policemen next to Vaughn replied.

"Who took the call?"

"I did." Ciana came forward. She was trembling. Vaughn took her hand.

"Was the caller a man or a woman?"

"A man. He had a deep voice."

"Could you detect an accent?"

Ciana thought for a moment. "No. He sounded like a native Italian."

"What exactly did he say?"

Ciana took a deep breath. "He said, 'I have hidden two kilos of Tovex in your building. It will go off in exactly one hour.' Then the line went dead."

Constantine watched the man in the blast suit duck-walk to the group and listen to Ciana's words. The suit had to be stifling but the reflection off the glass helmet obscured the occupant's features.

"I am First Captain Novara," the man said, raising a heavily padded arm in salute. "Anonymous telephone threat?"

"Probably a crank," Colonel Gallo replied, "but you never know. What do you need?"

"How do I turn that damn alarm off?"

Ciana meekly raised her hand. "There is a red fire alarm box in the main hallway just to the right of the business office. I pulled the handle down. If you push it up, the alarm should stop."

"How do I get into locked rooms like supply rooms, maintenance rooms, electrical and furnace areas?"

"I had all the locks updated three years ago," Vaughn said, coming forward and reaching into his pocket. "This master key will open every lock in the building."

Captain Novara took the key from Vaughn and secured it in a pocket on his vest, which already held a variety of tools. "Luther, komm. Time to go to work." The walking toolbox took the dog's leash from

the handler.

Luther responded by bounding towards the building's front door with such enthusiasm that Novara nearly fell over.

* * *

INSIDE the Institute, Novara went directly to the fire alarm box and silenced the klaxon. He entered the main office, noted the absence of any security cameras, and began taking pictures with his mobile phone. Past the receptionist's desk, he directed Luther to a door bearing a brass plaque that read: CHANCELLOR. The door was unlocked. Inside, he tied the dog's leash to the massive door handle and began photographing the room. He noted the location of the Chancellor's desk, chairs, and the large freestanding safe in the back of the room. Novara shuffled to the safe, snapped shots of the door, and took a close-up of the combination dial.

Luther sat on its rear haunches and panted as Novara removed a matchbook-sized aluminum block from his pocket. Hinged at one end, the block opened to reveal a center trough cut in the top and bottom portion. Both halves were filled with clay. A glance at the office's windows confirmed that no one was observing him. He positioned Chancellor Vaughn's key on top of the clay, closed the two halves, and pressed them together.

Novara looked around again to verify that he was alone. He separated the two halves and carefully removed the key. The impression was perfect. When he returned to his apartment, he would fill the cavity with molten lead and use that impression to cut a new key.

Novara spent the next forty-five minutes with Luther, shuffling through the Institute's empty rooms before returning to the street. "All clear," he yelled, raising the shield on his bubble-shaped helmet.

The carabinieri who had brought Luther ran to the Captain and helped him to the makeshift command center.

"False alarm," Captain Navaro said, handing Vaughn his key. "The building is safe."



Roma Termini Train Station, Rome, Italy
Sunday, June 3rd

“**WAKE** up,” Constantine whispered, kissing Nadia’s cheek. “We are arriving in Rome.” After the bomb scare, Constantine managed to catch the last Lufthansa flight to Bern, Switzerland. Taking the train back, neither of them had slept much during the ten-hour train ride. Nadia took a pain pill around six in the morning that finally allowed her to nod off.

Nadia yawned and bundled her blonde hair over her right shoulder. “I must look a sight.”

“You look beautiful.” He kissed her again, remembering the icy November afternoon when they first met. Her skin still beckoned with the scent of berries, sandalwood and spice. “Why did I try so hard not to fall in love with you.”

Nadia made a catlike stretch with her arms. “You were a priest.”

“I was an empty vessel. You filled that emptiness with a love deeper than I had ever experienced.”

“I caused you to relinquish your vow.”

“I am at peace with everything that happened. Well, almost everything. I wish I could have taken that bullet for you.”

“Stop that,” Nadia said, pulling him close for another kiss.

A metallic clank rumbled through the train as it came to a rest.

“Stazione Termini. Ciana will be meeting us to take us home.” Constantine stood and retrieved a suitcase and pair of crutches from an overhead rack. After waiting for the other passengers to depart, he helped Nadia stand.

“*Chyort voz’mi!*” Nadia exhaled the Russian curse as she put weight on her repaired hip.

Constantine smiled. Nadia’s infrequent use of Russian always expressed a profanity. He put his free hand on her waist. “Slow and easy. I am right behind you.”

The pair shuffled to the back of the car where they confronted two narrow steps. Before Constantine could react, a woman stepped into the car and helped steady Nadia’s crutches on the first step.

“I am so happy to see you walking,” Ciana said as she guided Nadia onto the platform. The two women embraced. “You look fantastic.” She released Nadia and gave Constantine a cheek kiss.

A tear ran down Ciana’s cheek. Constantine offered Ciana his handkerchief and returned her hug. “Thank you for helping us.” He knew her tears were partly caused by her personal feelings of loss.

“I have a limousine waiting just outside the main entrance,” Ciana said, blotting her eyes.

“A limousine?” Constantine asked, sucking in a quick breath.

“A minibus really. Chancellor Vaughn knew that I could not get everyone in my Fiat and paid for a limousine to pick you up.”

"I hope the Rector does not find out. He will take it out of my pay!" Constantine tried to be cheery. He noticed that Nadia was wincing with every step. Her pain medication was wearing off.

As the trio sauntered out of the terminal into June's unusually hot weather, Constantine felt a chill run down his spine. His pulse pounded, hair rising on the back of his neck. *No! Please, not again!* He paused under a large Roma Termini sign, recalling what Nadia had taught him about surveillance. He regulated his breathing and became hyperaware of his surroundings.

"Is something wrong?" Nadia asked.

The driver of a blue Mercedes Sprinter Minibus came toward them. He wore the black cap of a limousine driver and large, aviator-style sunglasses. "This way," the chauffeur said, taking the suitcase from Constantine.

"No, everything is fine." Constantine noticed that he was broad shouldered for a man in his youth; his body moved with a tightness that only comes from years of physical training.

The driver clicked a key fob in his hand and the bi-fold doors on the side of the Mercedes parted.

Constantine entered the Sprinter first, took the crutches, and lifted Nadia over the van's two steps. Holding her arms as she settled on a bench seat facing the door, he sat next to her. Nadia rested her head on his shoulder and squeezed his hand. Constantine put his arm around her and drew her close. *She has changed. She does not sense that anything is wrong.* He lowered his head and kissed the top of her forehead. Her hair was astringent, a combination of hospital shampoo and disinfectant. Ciana entered with a flourish and sat on a seat opposite them.

"Please remain seated," the driver said, starting the diesel engine. He edged the Mercedes into the chaos of traffic converging on the station.

"Before I forget," Ciana said, addressing Constantine, "the Chancellor has requested that you attend a meeting in his office Monday morning at nine."

"Nadia has an appointment with a neurosurgeon at Agostino Gemelli Hospital Monday morning. Do you know what the meeting is about?" Constantine kept his eyes on the driver as he spoke. The man was navigating Rome's congested streets with considerable skill.

"I was not told, but I assume it concerns the bomb threat."

The acid in Constantine's stomach churned. "I must give Nadia's appointment—"

"Let me help," Ciana interrupted. "I can be at your apartment Monday at eight. You can attend your meeting and I will take Nadia to her doctor's appointment."

"You have done so much already."

"It would be my pleasure. Besides, the Chancellor has already told me that I will not be needed for the meeting."

Constantine was about to object when the Mercedes rolled to a stop outside of his new apartment just outside of Campo dei Fiori. With a hiss of pressurized air, the side doors opened.

Constantine sprang up with his senses on high alert. Nadia had taught him to look for anything or anyone out of place. He assisted Nadia to a standing position and scrutinized his neighborhood. Nothing looked unusual. Couples ambled hand in hand on the sidewalk. A boy played with his dog. Cars parked at the curb were unoccupied. He realized that he had been holding his breath and exhaled a loud whoosh.

"Is something bothering you?" Nadia asked again.

"No," he said, regaining his composure. "It just feels good to have you home." He guided Nadia's crutches down the vehicle's two steps while the driver got out and gathered the suitcase.

"I will call you Sunday to confirm everything, but plan on me being here Monday at eight," Ciana

said.

Constantine waved an acknowledgement to Ciana as he guided Nadia to the apartment's front door. The morning sun did not reduce the goose bumps on his arms. As soon as she was inside, he blocked the doorway with his body. The driver handed Constantine the suitcase and turned without saying a word.

This is crazy. I am being paranoid. Constantine called to the driver. *"Solo un momento."* He handed the man a twenty-euro tip.

"Grazie mille," the man replied, tipping his cap. His close-cropped black hair was a military cut. Without knowing why, Constantine locked the door and threw the deadbolt.



New York City, New York
Monday, June 4th

TALL, toned, and sporting a deep tan that signified health, wealth, and power, Michel Van Marter, at age forty-seven, looked more like a physical trainer than a broker of religious antiquities. As he peered out the fourth floor bedroom window of his home and office at 7 West 54th Street, he witnessed the breaking sun stirring the Big Apple to life. The red digits on his nightstand's alarm clock flashed 6:00. In a few more hours, people across the street would be queuing up at MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art.

He had paid \$50 million for the four story Beaux-Arts mansion three years ago and spent another \$15 million remodeling. The bottom floor was converted to a business office and conference room although there were no business signs or names anywhere on the building's exterior. The top three floors were made into a private residence including a sophisticated workout room, a state-of-the-art home theatre, and a walk-in wine cellar. At a finished price of \$6,288 a square foot, 7 West had blown the lid off of Manhattan's already stratospheric real estate market.

"What time is it?" Anika asked. Eighteen years his junior, the Icelandic blonde had been his lover for the past three years. A graduate of Reykjavik University, Anika was the most practiced and experimental sexual partner he had ever experienced although she resisted his desire to explore bondage

"Time to get your lazy ass out of bed. I am going downstairs to exercise."

Anika slid from under the covers and stretched. Wearing only a black G-string panty with tie sides, she was just an inch shorter than Van Marter. Her blonde hair flowed down her long neck to cover two firm and perfectly pointed breasts. Mother Nature had given her the high cheekbones, pouty lips, and chiseled abdomen that She reserved for only Her most magnificent creations.

Strutting to Van Marter, she put her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs around his waist. "I can give you all the exercise you need."

Van Marter looked at the digital clock again and calculated the time in Rome. There was an hour to kill before he could make his phone call. Without saying a word, he carried Anika to the bed and laid her on her back.

* * *

"**DONELLE**, I am expecting a call from America. I will be in my office," Aldo Vitali said,

dashing through his Rome showroom to a rear office. Vitali Antiquities had brokered Roman *objets d'art* since 1899. The fourth-generation owner of the business, Vitali was a man of trim build with dark skin, big brown eyes, and a two-day growth of stubble on his chin.

The retail gallery portion of Vitali Antiquities was completely legitimate, although often criticized for gouging unknowledgeable tourists. The firm's brokerage business, headed by Aldo, often slid into greyer territory—especially when religious artifacts were involved.

"*Sì signore*," Donelle replied.

Vitali had just settled at his desk and poured a generous measure of Campari over ice when his desk telephone rang. "Sì."

"Your call from America is on line two."

"Mr. Van Marter, thank you for calling," Vitali said in near perfect English.

"Have we met?" Van Marter asked.

"Not face-to-face, but I offered a very rare book at auction about four years ago. I believe you dropped out of the bidding at a million euros."

"Is this the book you emailed me about?"

"The same. It is on its way to a very secure government vault where it will never be seen again, but there may be a short window for...acquisition." Vitali took a sip of the red aperitif.

"Your asking price for this rare book?"

"Five million."

"Dollars?"

"Euros."

"I would not be interested at that price. There would be no margin left for me. I would be all in at one point five million."

"Mr. Van Marter," Vitali said with a calmness that was almost unsettling, "you and I know the value of this Codex. This squabbling is beneath both of us. Let us agree on three million and conclude our business."

"Half in advance and the balance upon delivery to my export agent in Naples."

"Of course. I will fax you our bank information."

"And I will send you my export agent's name and address. What is your timetable?"

"Very soon. Three days, five at most."

"Documentation?"

"Mr. Van Marter! Items like this do not come with letters of provenance."

"Of course. That concludes our business then?"

"Have a good day, Mr. Van Marter," Vitali said, downing the last of his Campari, "and may I be the first to congratulate you on an item very well bought." He ended the call and poured himself another measure.

The early afternoon sun did little to brighten Vitali's dour office. Layers of dust covered a myriad of ancient scrolls and stone tablets, giving the room a tomb-like feeling. Vitali did not care. This would be the single largest sale in his firm's history. He clapped his hands together and dialed the receptionist in the front gallery. "Donelle, please have Signor Novara contact me at his earliest convenience."