

# **Shroud of the Healer**

**Matt Rider, #2**

**by Christopher Wright, ...**

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*Shroud of the Healer* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



## Prologue

### New York—1985

"FATHER, I have sinned."

No request for absolution, just a blunt statement of fact. Father Stephen Valdieri nodded dutifully in the shadows of the confessional, even though he knew it was impossible for the middle-aged penitent to see this response. The accent sounded East Coast, but from somewhere a little further south. Washington perhaps.

"Tell me your sins."

"Father, I have sinned, but I am not here for forgiveness."

Valdieri waited. Never before had he encountered such an astonishing situation. Admissions of dishonesty, anger, blasphemy, bizarre perversions, sins of the flesh -- all of them everyday fare within the community. But never had a person come to confession refusing forgiveness.

The man continued after a considerable pause. "I am here because it is vital that I confide in someone who will not seek me out for retribution. Someone who will understand that my motives were not exclusively selfish." He spoke with the measured formality of a highly educated man. This was certainly not a parishioner.

The clock on the tower struck eight times, the jarring chimes reverberating through the musty fabric of the building. Stephen Valdieri said nothing. Even the most reluctant confessor would feel duty bound to fill the silence that followed. "I was with the U.S. embassy in Moscow." The man hesitated. "Father, I have the Smolensk icons."

Adrenaline pumped through the priest. The man on the other side of the screen claimed to possess the fabulous art treasures that the Communist state stole from the people of Russia in 1918. Over a hundred religious icons that had recently been stolen from the Communists by ... by a Catholic? An American?

"How did you get them?"

"I paid the custodian for them, Father. It was a fair price. I do not regard full payment as theft."

Valdieri drew his breath sharply. "I fail to see a distinction in this instance. The Russian custodian was not the owner."

"If I return them to the Communists they will confiscate them from the people. What advice do you have for me, Father?"

The advice was far from obvious. The Communists would indeed appropriate them once more, and the Christian Church might never see them again. "Are you prepared to take me to them now?"

"No, Father, that is not an option."

Valdieri tried to remain calm. If the Catholic Church could hold the treasure safely in the West until such time as Communist rule collapsed in the Soviet Union—for that time was surely coming—then he, Father Stephen Valdieri, might well be heralded as the person responsible for healing a thousand years of rancor with the Russian Church.

But his work in this Brooklyn parish ended on Sunday. He had been offered a step up in his calling. A choice of steps, in fact. A move to Rome as a simple priest in the Vatican, or promotion from Father to Monsignor in Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Fifth Avenue across the East River. Monsignor Stephen Valdieri? It sounded great. His fellow clerics had gasped at the news and told him that of course he only had one possible option.

But he was off to Rome on Monday. And now he could see how opportune had been his decision. A satisfactory outcome could guarantee his swift advancement into the Vatican hierarchy. Maybe he should change his name to Stefano in readiness. His grandparents had come to the States from Italy, and proudly taught him to speak the language of his ancestors. But his parents were American citizens. And so was he. He would stay as Stephen Valdieri, an American with Italian roots. Maybe he would become Monsignor Valdieri in Rome one day, even Bishop Valdieri. Archbishop? Cardinal? Someone in the Vatican obviously thought he had potential.

"You must give me the icons," he said aloud. "You will be regarded as a hero in the West, saving them from the Communists."

"The icons are not in America."

"Wherever you have them concealed, I implore you to lead me to them."

"They are in a European country that has long captivated me. I am retiring there shortly."

"Without forgiveness?"

"Forgiveness can keep until I am dead, Father. That is when the icons will be returned. Remember, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. You are playing with fire."

But the man had already gone. Stephen Valdieri snatched the curtain aside to see the church door closing. The sanctity of the confessional. He slapped the polished wood in frustration. Over the centuries, people had died for those icons. Something told him that the killing had not stopped. To find fame through recovering those works of religious art was to risk death. But fame always had a price.

# Chapter 1

## England—The Present

MATT REACHED for the key ring as it spun towards him through the air. "Not another inside job?"

"Just the one, kiddo. A small painting in an empty house. I've even got a photo of it. Take my BMW."

Matt turned the house door and alarm keys in his hand and studied them suspiciously. "You sure the house is empty?"

Ken Habgood nodded in encouragement. "Planning, that's what it's all about. But keep your eyes open and be careful. Believe me, the house owner can be trouble."

"Sounds much more fun than going to the south of France," observed Matt dryly.

The tall man behind the desk smiled a row of large teeth. "You sound down in the dumps today, kiddo. Most people would be looking forward to their summer break."

Matt wasn't going to tell Ken about his worries over Zoé Champanelle. He was now wondering if Zoé would still be there when he got back after work. He'd been playing Shostakovich last night, the Fourth String Quartet, loudly. The music helped control his pent-up emotions. Zoé had been in the bedroom trying to play a Debussy Arabesque on her flute, and had objected more forcibly than usual.

She was packing when he left for work this morning, but maybe not for their trip to Avignon. She might be going home to her parents in France. Or worse, going back to Florian with whom she has once had "an understanding". Something had been on Zoé's mind for weeks, causing stupid arguments. He felt angry with himself now, but not guilty. Zoé had no right to be disapproving of his work.

He tossed the key ring to the ceiling and caught it with one hand. "I hope you've done your homework, Ken."

Ken closed his eyes and sighed noisily. "It will be okay," he promised, but with little conviction. "Leave the painting in the back of my car."

Matt Rider was already wondering why he'd bothered to come to work at all. There must be better ways for someone in his thirties to spend his time. He should be off this evening to France. But he wouldn't go without Zoé.

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THE HOUSE stood at the end of a short drive, its front door in serious need of paint, and the curtain linings gray with years of grime. Scattered sheets of newspaper hung amongst the shrubs. This was not the residence of a house-proud person. Matt made a quick assessment of the situation. He could see no one in the windows. Perhaps Ken was right; perhaps the owner had no idea he was coming.

The open ground gave no cover. He wouldn't walk. He needed wheels to leave quickly. He started to sweat as he inched Ken's maroon BMW towards the black

gates. Every move had to be made without hesitation. There were never second chances.

He rehearsed the procedure once more in his mind. Drive confidently up to the house, ring the bell, wait one minute, ring again, wait, unlock the front door, disable the house alarm with the small key, grab the painting, jump in the car, start the engine—then floor the pedal. It was routine stuff. He'd done it before, sometimes with the house alarm sounding and the strobe light flashing. The keys in his pocket felt reassuring. There would be no problems today. According to Ken.

Just take the painting and go. Jobs like this worried Zoé, and could be the cause of recent arguments.

He glanced briefly along the tree-lined street in this run-down district and let in the clutch. No one had answered the phone when he'd rung it two minutes ago on his mobile. He was going in.

The doorbell remained unanswered. The door key fitted. The warning buzzer in the alarm sounded, but went silent when he turned the immobilizer key. He began to relax. The alarm meant there was no one at home.

The hall smelt strongly of cooking. Fried onions. He was glad the house was empty. People could go to great lengths to keep hold of a valuable painting. It tallied with the photo and was exactly where Ken had said it would be. He lifted it from the wall and hurried back to the car.

Ken's BMW was ten years old. He held his breath and willed the motor to fire first time. The engine purred into life. A sharp blip on the throttle released a surge of power and a hum of energy. The clutch bit with the revs still high. Someone shouted. A bulky figure in jeans and a dirty vest stood blocking the exit. Matt saw the scaffold pole in the man's hands and was tempted to cut the engine and run, but he guessed he'd be a lot safer if he stayed in the car and kept going. With its tires spinning wildly on the loose gravel the BMW thundered backwards towards the gates—and the raised scaffold pole.

At first it looked as though the man would hold his ground, but at the last moment he jumped to one side, smashing the metal shaft down on the rear window. Matt's view in the mirror was blasted away in a cloud of white splinters.

Before the man could raise the weapon for a second strike Matt was in the road, twisting the steering wheel for a rapid getaway. From close behind he could hear the frantic sound of a horn and the screech of brakes from a large van, but there was no collision. The man hurled the pole as Matt took off in a cloud of burning rubber.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon—Avignon, France**

DR. JIM KAPPA read his leaked copy of the copy of the memo that Cardinal Delgado of the Vatican Medical Assembly had sent to Archbishop Valdieri twelve days ago. He should have been shown it much sooner. Valdieri presented a

substantial threat to K7 if he was investigating the clinic. Many members of K7 wanted to see the Pope dead.

MEMO FROM OTTORINO CARDINAL DELGARDO  
CHIEF ADVISER, VATICAN MEDICAL ASSEMBLY  
TO ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN VALDIERI  
VATICAN SECURITY SERVICES, ROME  
EXTREMELY CONFIDENTIAL

*My Dear Stephen,*

The health of the Holy Father continues to deteriorate. The Vatican Medical Assembly is once more considering the generous offer by Dr. Kappa to treat the Holy Father at the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon, in Avignon, France.

I know you have recently been investigating Dr. Kappa and his clinic, but according to your report you have exposed nothing to cause us concern. There would therefore no longer seem to be a good reason to decline Dr. Kappa's offer.

Since you are responsible for the Holy Father's safety whenever he is absent from Rome, please prepare a detailed security schedule for an immediate visit, and attend to the matter with the maximum confidentiality. I know you will appreciate that it is essential that the media are not alerted, since the world is unaware of the serious nature of the Holy Father's ill health.

## Chapter 3

### England

"OKAY, OKAY!" Matt Rider held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, and in a vain hope that Ken Habgood would get off his back. "So he smashed the rear window of your old BMW. Nearly had me with that metal pole, too. I thought you'd checked the place was deserted."

Ken banged his fist down on the desk in a rare display of irritation. The suite of office furniture was nearly new, bought from a self-assembly warehouse six months ago. Matt couldn't make up his mind whether the shiny surface impressed clients. Certainly he would have cluttered the top a little, if only to convey an impression of being busy.

"I'll tell you something," the boss of Habgood Securities shouted, a little too loudly for Matt's liking. "If anyone saw you dressed in those clothes they'd have *known* you were up to no good."

"Oh great. I risk my life repossessing a painting for a client, and all you can think about is a bit of broken glass."

"How am I going to explain it to my insurance company?"

"Put it down as expenses on your client's account. She's got the painting her lover ran off with." Matt pulled at the front of his denim jacket and pointed to the frayed edges. "I can't afford anything else."

"I'll pay you more when things look up, kiddo. A private investigator's life is a hard one." It was time to make peace, but maybe score a point first. "How do you expect me to give Zoé a good time on what I take home? She had to shell out for the car insurance last month, and nurses aren't exactly over-paid."

"I warned you about money when you came here to work for me. A PI's life is all stress and low rewards. You're lucky Zoé has a steady job at the hospital."

"I'm worried about *my* job, not Zoé's."

"Okay, I'm sorry." Ken seemed to be mellowing. "Habgood Securities is struggling at present."

"I sometimes wish I'd stayed with the police."

"I hope you haven't told them about the attack."

Matt shook his head. "I hate filling in forms. But if you happen to bump into any of them, give them all my love."

"I shouldn't think they'll want it. I know for a fact the chief constable at Trinity Green breathed a sigh of relief when you walked out of the force."

"You're welcome to replace me while I'm gone—if you can find anyone dumb enough to risk their life doing this job for peanuts." Straight away Matt regretted his words.

But Ken's mind seemed to be returning to running Habgood Securities as he moved to the computer terminal and began to tap out what looked like a final demand for an insurance investigation. He grinned at Matt. "Your mate Mac in that cyber cafe down Queens Street did a great job on this PC."

"Mac the Hack?" Matt shook his head. "He's probably loaded your machine with a virus. Or wiped half the files from the hard disk. That man gets more fun out of cracking passwords and writing viruses than doing anything useful to a computer."

Ken refused to rise to the bait though he did look closely at the screen. "Computers are where the money is, kiddo. We're in the wrong business. You should see what he charged me for a few minutes' work fitting a new video card."

"I'm trying to say goodbye. I want to be away before dark."

"Are you really taking that wreck of a Mini all the way to France?"

"Assuming Zoé still wants to come."

"Trouble?"

"I don't think Zoé likes what I'm doing here. She was acting strange last night when we were packing." Matt shrugged.

"Nothing like a holiday to break a relationship."

"Thanks."

"Only trying to be helpful, kiddo. Make sure you enjoy Avignon."

"Maybe Zoé's changed her mind now, but she's been saying it's time I met her family in Clermont-Ferrand. We can't call on the way down; her parents are away in Italy."

"It's probably better that way round. If Zoé's mother doesn't take to you it could spoil your holiday."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she might be shocked at what her cherished daughter has picked up in England."

"It's going to make her year."

"You hope. Isn't it all a long way? I mean, you need a large car to go that far. Now take my BMW. It's..."

"It's off the road, Ken. With a broken window. See you a fortnight Monday." Matt was already at the top of the stairs. He put his head back round the door. "Look in Yellow Pages for a mobile windshield repairer. And make sure they vacuum the rear seat. You'll never believe how much glass there was in that window."

## Chapter 4

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE LARGE sheet of x-ray film helped reduce the glare from the lightbox. Dr. Jim Kappa studied the fine lines that made up the side view of a human head. The teeth showed as clear emulsion, with the upper and lower jaws fixed firmly together in a display of anguish. Perhaps the patient already knew what the scans and radiographs would reveal.

"A highly malignant brain lesion." Kappa spoke softly to Mario Bernetti, as though the image on the film might overhear the devastating diagnosis. "You're the neurosurgeon, Mario, so the decision is yours. I'll support you if you decide on an immediate operation for Mr. Goldstein."

Dr. Bernetti clipped a second sheet of film to the box on the wall and leaned forward, his face lit by a glow of blue light. The CT scan showed the same patient, this time from the front. Again the jaw was firmly closed, but from this angle the teeth appeared to be set in a forced smile of resignation. The pale area of blood vessels and tissue that made up the malignant neoplasm sat directly between the upper teeth and the eye sockets.

Bernetti compared the x-ray image with the computerized tomography scan. "It look bad, Jim, but I work good on this one." He spoke in English but his voice sounded heavy with an Italian accent. "I no lose many patients yet. Not even you American surgeons come close to my record. When you think I should operate on Signor Goldstein?"

"We both know a tumor of this size and position can't wait." Kappa tapped the pale gray area on the film, outlining the malignant growth with the tip of a pencil. "I suggest you do one more scan, then start with a left frontal approach."

"Tonight?"

Kappa swung the pencil point in an arc across the image. "I'll arrange the operating room for a craniotomy."

Bernetti nodded. "Sure. I use a needle biopsy." He made a stabbing movement with his fingers. "I go deep into the brain."

The sound of a helicopter intruded into the clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon. Kappa looked up, as though he expected to see the aircraft through the



walls of the room. "That will be Mr. Michener, our new patient from California. The pilot's going back to Nice this evening, Mario. I want you to give him a complete set of these scans, and make sure he gets them on the New York plane tonight. Goldstein's specialist in Manhattan is anxious to know the worst."

Bernetti flicked the lightbox off. The unlit film became black, concealing the devastating medical evidence. "This one bad, Jim. But me, I make Signor Goldstein happy." He replaced the sheets of film in their large red folder. "I make his doctor in America happy too."

"Sure, Mario, we're here to make everyone happy. I'll tell you what." Kappa leaned close to his colleague and nodded towards the Convent of the Little Sisters that shared the site. "There's a young dark-eyed Sister with a gorgeous face. She's new to the convent. I bet I could make her happy."

Bernetti was already writing the medical report of the destructive tumor deep inside Goldstein's head. He looked up and sounded irate. "Me, I no touch the Sisters here in Avignon. Maybe I see too much of them at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome. Sorry, Jim, I no share your humor."

## Chapter 5

### Avignon, France

"I WANT you to promise me one thing, Matt." Zoé ran her fingers down his cheek.

"Which is?"

"You must forget about Ken. You are *très crispé*, much too uptight. We are here for a holiday. That Ken 'Abgood he is not worth spoiling a holiday for."

Matt nodded. Although Zoé was speaking English, her French accent seemed to have grown stronger as soon as they crossed the Channel. It was their first Sunday, and not even lunchtime. Something seemed to be still bothering Zoé, but whatever it was it remained unspoken.

He looked at the slightly upturned nose, the firm but narrow eyebrows, and the attractively wide mouth. The open windows on the journey down the autoroute in the little Austin Mini had played havoc with her long, mid-brown hair. The casual curls that Zoé had taken so long to get just right last night almost concealed the sensuous neck that had first attracted him in the bookshop nearly a year ago. His own fair hair was short enough to have been scarcely disturbed.

"What are you thinking, Matt?"

Zoé's question took him by surprise. "I'm thinking... thinking I don't want to lose you." He gave a quick smile.

"You think I would walk out on you without saying anything?" she asked in surprise.

"Of course you wouldn't." Not that he was being strictly honest. It was more what he hoped than what he knew. Sometimes he couldn't figure Zoé out. Well, he wasn't going to let her go easily.

"Do I look all right, Matt?"

Zoé must know she was the center of attention in this bar. "You should have brought your nurse's uniform. You know how it turns me on."

"Only the outfit?"

Matt laughed, glad to see Zoé starting to relax after many days of tension at home. "And the cold stethoscope. You can give me a check-up with that any time, Nurse Champanelle."

"Behave yourself." Zoé looked embarrassed.

He took hold of her warm hand under the small bistro table. "Nothing's more important to me than you."

"Not Ken?"

Here it was again. "Of course not." He wouldn't be the one to start the argument.

The outside tables had a view of the old-fashioned roundabout of galloping horses in the central street, but they were all occupied. Inside, the cool bar had plenty of room. Matt found Avignon fascinating, and this was only their first full day.

The awareness of the envious men stealing glances at Zoé gave him a depraved thrill. "I'm not sure I should have brought you in here. There isn't a man who hasn't studied your body."

Zoé returned the compliment with a smile. "That is *exactement* the sort of thing you would notice, being a PI."

"Goes with the job. Nothing but attractive women all day long in my work, and plenty of time to look at them." He stood up and tried to catch the attention of a waiter. A crowd of tourists pouring through this ancient city blocked the narrow street that lead through to the Papal Palace. "I'll have to move the car if we don't get served soon. A bright orange Mini will be like a magnet for parking wardens."

Zoé pulled at his arm. "Sit down. It will not take us long to drink a coffee—if they ever serve us. There are fifteen minutes left on the parking ticket."

Matt noticed a young woman sitting alone at the next table. She had been there when they arrived, and she kept glancing across. He tried to ignore her. "Yes, if. *Les contractuels*, traffic wardens and parking attendants are everywhere, in every country."

"They have a job to do." Zoé looked thoughtful. "I think perhaps PIs have the same image."

"Perhaps." He knew what was coming next. Ken Habgood was right when he said a holiday was make or break. "When we get back I might look around for something better. If that's what you want."

"You are good at your work, Matt. You have the training with the police."

"Sure." Matt managed to get noticed by the waiter. "*Deux cafés au lait*," adding quietly, "*S'il vous plaît*." He turned to Zoé. "You're sitting with a man who once had a promising career in the police force, but ended up working for a backstreet detective agency."

Zoé nodded. "You do not have to do the divorces. The surveillance you set up for Ken in the big office block last month with the video cameras. It was clever. Even Ken said so."

"Ken's been good to me. I owe him a few more favors yet."

"Always you are thinking about your work."

"Don't start to nag. The drive here blew all thoughts of work away." He paused. "And that noise from the transmission helped."

"Perhaps." Zoé smiled uncomfortably, as though she had been deliberately setting up this conversation. "I have been thinking."

"I know something's worrying you. *Merci*." Matt leaned back as the waiter served the coffee.

"Ken, he is a good man, but he is mean. Why does he have a BMW while you only have your old Mini?"

"That BMW's ten years old. It's even more of a liability than my Mini. Is that what's been worrying you?"

She gave his hand a squeeze. "Nobody loves a PI. Except me."

Matt tried his coffee. It was only lukewarm. Zoé didn't seem to understand the kick he got from working for Ken Habgood. What little money there was, Ken seemed to share generously enough. "There are too many people in the private investigation business, that's the trouble."

Zoé raised her voice slightly. "You have over ten years with the police to help you start the business of your own. People would take you seriously."

"People want to take me out—with steel scaffold poles. Anyway, you're wrong. Most private investigators are ex-cops." Matt withdrew his hand from Zoé's and placed it over the top of his cup. "Ken still thinks I left the police in some sort of disgrace."

"He knows did they not fire you. He knows you resigned."

"He knows I got out in time—before it all hit the fan. That drugs case with the MP's son got very messy in the end. There are things I haven't told you." Matt sighed. The woman on the next table caught his eye and smiled. He nodded back and returned to his tepid coffee. "Anyway," he said defiantly, trying to make it the last word on the subject, "you have to think of me like Saint George, fighting the dragon; righting wrongs and all that."

"There is... something I want to talk to you about," said Zoé after a significant pause.

The woman on the next table kept smiling. Matt smiled at her, briefly, but quickly turned back to Zoé and hoped she'd not noticed.

"Excuse me." The woman leaned towards their table before Zoé could continue. Her accent was North American. "I couldn't help overhearing you guys talking." She looked at Zoé. "You're Zoé Champanelle. Don't you remember me? I'm Leanne."

Zoé seemed to be hiding her rivalry well as she returned the smile. "You are American?"

"From Albuquerque. We met in France a few years back, when I was working at the cancer center in Lyon. I'm nursing here in Avignon now, at the Clinic of the Little Sisters up in the hills. I'm Leanne Corbin now."

Matt watched the polite look on Zoé's face turn to genuine pleasure. "Leanne? Yes, of course I remember. We were on the same ward. Always you made the jokes."

Leanne turned her chair. "Did I hear you say this good looking guy is some sort of detective? Is it all right if I join you, Zoé?"

"Zo?" Matt mouthed the word and tried not to laugh out loud. Zoé had kept quiet about this detail of her past. She raised one of her narrow eyebrows as though to tell him to say no more. He turned to the woman. "I met Zoé in an English bookshop last year. It's a long story. We're... going steady."

The woman had been eyeing him closely and he tried to put the right emphasis on the fact that he was already fixed up. Zoé's New Mexican friend made him think of the days when he'd been free to respond to smiling women. "We're on holiday. Vacation."

"Nice place, Avignon." Leanne Corbin nodded as though to herself. "I was about to go back to Albuquerque when, wham, I met this guy here in town one evening. We got married three months later. He's a good man."

Matt shrugged. What a mass of shortcomings that description could conceal. Yet Leanne seemed content. "Does your husband work at the clinic?"

Leanne laughed, and Matt decided that if she were to let her dark hair free from the tightly pulled bunch at the back, this woman would look almost desirable. "Alain's brother is the clever one: he's a priest. Alain works in a factory. Making farm machinery." She said it as though no further explanation was necessary. But in case it was, she added, "Alain's a lovely man, and we're very happy."

Matt sighed silently. Couldn't they have a quiet Sunday morning coffee without being interrupted? Zoé had been about to unburden herself.

A young man in tan chinos and a bright floral shirt stared at them across the bar. Leanne lowered her voice. "I don't want to make trouble, and I know Alain wouldn't want me to get involved."

"Involved in what?" Matt made room so Zoé's old nursing friend could slide her chair across.

Leanne came closer than Matt intended and he could feel the warmth from her arms. Her voice was quiet. "That man watching us is called Cranburg. He's part of the clinic's security team."

"Are you in some sort of trouble?" asked Matt.

"I found a large envelope in... in... the corridor at the clinic. I shouldn't have looked inside."

"But you did," said Matt.

"I wish I'd left it alone."

"Drugs?"

Leanne just stared at Matt, deep in thought.

After a minute Matt tried again, hoping for some sort of response. The silence wasn't his fault. This woman had insisted on gatecrashing their table. "Was there a name on the envelope?"

Leanne sounded vague. "Yes." She caught hold of Matt's arm. "Anyway, you're wrong. Something smells, but it's nothing to do with drugs. I did some research in the Internet café round the corner. Cranburg came in for a coffee, but no way can he have known what I was looking for on the café computer." She nodded towards the man in the bright shirt who was getting himself another drink.

"That's not..." Matt decided not to say anything that might worry Leanne unnecessarily. Anyone using a search engine on the Internet left a full history trail, unless they were careful to delete everything. "If you don't want the envelope, return it."

"I don't know how to do it." Leanne sounded agitated. "I can't go to the surgeon and say, 'Excuse me, I found this and opened it.'"

"Surgeon?" said Matt in surprise.

Leanne nodded slowly. "I don't like the guy."

"Then stick it in the internal mail. No one will know who found it."

Leanne seemed flustered. "I'm wondering how many of the doctors are involved. Have you ever heard of K7?"

Matt shook his head. "What's K7? A mountain?"

"Cut out the comedy and listen to Leanne," said Zoé sharply.

"K7 isn't a place, it's a brotherhood."

Matt looked up at the ceiling as though this might unlock his memory. The man at the bar, Cranburg, seemed to be paying them no attention now. Maybe he never had been. "You make it sound like a local branch of P2, the Italian Masonic Lodge."

Leanne shrugged. "It's no big deal."

Matt knew it obviously was. A long-lost nursing colleague wouldn't pull up a chair like this and start a conversation if she wasn't worried. "What do you want me to do? Go round and check on them?" It wasn't a serious suggestion. He caught sight of Zoé's critical glare. She could hardly see Leanne Corbin as a threat. She probably didn't want their holiday spoiled by unscheduled work. "Investigating K7 doesn't sound like my sort of activity." He shook his head firmly. "Not if it's like P2. No thanks."

"We have to be going soon," said Zoé. The smile was still on her face, but more obviously contrived now. "Our car, it is parked nearby, and the time on the ticket is running out. Matt is right I think. It is not the sort of work he does."

"I'm sorry if I sound jittery." Leanne loosened the top two buttons of her thin cream blouse. "I've not been too well for the past few weeks. I'm not infectious or anything, but I keep getting headaches."

"You must see a doctor." Zoé sounded concerned.

Leanne laughed. "You know what nurses are like. We're familiar with all the symptoms and are afraid of the worst. We have to be dying before we see a doctor. I'll have to go to the medical center at the clinic if things don't improve soon. Hey, I'm sorry to keep on about it, but if this guy of yours is a private investigator, I might have a job for him."

"He is," said Zoé. "But he is on his holiday."

Matt smiled. Zoé could be very firm. Perhaps it was just as well: he was already warming to the idea of nosing around. Leanne didn't seem ready to give up. "Do you know about Sister Angela's visions?"

Matt drained his cup of lukewarm coffee, including the few grounds stagnating at the bottom. What an oddball to meet in a place like this. Zoé must have made some weird friends in the past. He tried to make his reply sound dismissive. "No, I can't say we do."

"Can I tell you about them? Please?"

Zoé, as a nurse, must have sensed something in Leanne's voice. She nodded encouragingly.

Leanne Corbin leaned further forward, revealing a full cleavage of plentiful freckles. "Sister Angela lives at the Convent of the Little Sisters. Up at Tourvillon."

That's where the clinic is. It's where I work." It was all a bit breathless. "Do you understand?"

"I know about the clinic," said Zoé slowly. "It is only small, but everyone knows about the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon."

"I don't," said Matt.

"By everyone, I mean everyone in medicine," said Zoé, and she looked encouragingly at Leanne. "Please go on."

"Tourvillon?" Matt wasn't going to be left out. "There's a map in the car. I'll get it, and buy a new parking ticket at the same time."

Outside in the hot morning sunshine he wondered whether to take his time -- or hurry back for Zoé's sake.

Three minutes later he was spreading the map on the small café table. "Tourvillon? Yes, got it. Up in the hills. About twenty minutes' drive. Go on, you were telling us about someone's visions."

Leanne smiled weakly. "I'm sorry. It all seems a bit silly now."

"Silly?" Matt could sense strong signals coming from Zoé, although they were probably invisible to anyone else. "No, it's not silly at all," he lied. "We'd like you to tell us. I know a thing or two about visions."

Leanne Corbin let this statement go unchallenged. "There's this old nun at the Convent. Sister Angela. She was under the weather the other day. Some sort of stomach upset. And the Mother Superior asked me..."

"The visions," interrupted Matt.

"I'm coming to them." The nurse nodded to herself. "The clinic's literature makes great play of two holy visions that Sister Angela once had. They say it makes the site like a sort of Lourdes."

"Miracles and things?" Matt tried not to yawn as he examined the stains in the bottom his cup.

"It was nineteen thirty-four. Sister Angela wasn't a Sister then, she was a thirteen-year-old kid. The Convent took her in as an orphan when she was only a few months old."

"That makes her well over eighty," observed Matt. "Fancy being shut up in a convent all your life. No wonder she's having visions."

Leanne frowned as she ran a finger round the top of her cup. "Sister Angela says no one believed her at the time. The Mother Superior, not this one of course, went to the local bishop to report the matter, but he came down all heavy. He told Sister Angela she was making it up to gain attention. She says he told her she was a fanciful and sinful girl."

"You're serious?" Matt had to pick up his empty cup to hide his face. "A fanciful and sinful girl?"

"That's what Sister Angela told me. Then World War Two started and France fell. The Nazi troops arrived and the first vision came true."

Matt felt more interested now. "You mean she predicted the German attack? Go on."

"The soldiers surrounded the Convent and ordered the Sisters to open the doors. They said they were looking for escaped prisoners of war and French partisans, but the Mother Superior wouldn't open up. In the end they blasted the

place with heavy guns which flattened the main building and killed some of the Sisters. There were no partisans."

Matt ordered more coffee for the three of them, but hot this time. "Chaud. Très chaud -- s'il vous plaît." He folded the map slowly. The story might be worth hearing after all. "Did Sister Angela tell you this?"

"She wanted to talk to someone, and I had a spare afternoon. She told me a lady appeared in the Convent garden to tell her three secrets."

"They always do."

"Do what?" asked Zoé in surprise.

"They always tell three secrets." Matt realized that Zoé and Leanne were staring at him. "I've read about things like this. The first two secrets usually happen, but not always the third. Maybe it's a sort of proof test so we can tell if the visions are genuine. Okay, so number one was the Germans. What about the second secret?"

Leanne nodded. "After the war the Vatican decided to fund the building of a hospital. Nothing was done for a few years, but eventually they started to build the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon."

"And this was the second vision of Sister Angela?" asked Zoé.

"So they say." Leanne leaned back so the waiter could replace the empty cups with three fresh ones he had brought on a battered tin tray. "*Merci.*"

"So *they* say?" Matt felt confused.

"I'll let you see the clinic's literature. There's a whole page about the visions. Sister Angela is quoted as saying that the lady in the garden told her a great center of healing would be built -- right on the spot where she appeared."

"I bet Sister Angela didn't say anything until after the clinic was built," said Matt trying not to sound too cynical. Zoé was never too keen on his cynical opinions.

Leanne nodded vigorously. "That's exactly the attitude the new Mother Superior took in nineteen sixty-five, and of course the new bishop agreed with her. No one had kept any records from the nineteen thirties, and everyone who knew Sister Angela before the war seems to be dead."

"Doesn't that prove my point?" asked Matt.

"You're right, they've only got Sister Angela's word for it. When Sister Angela reported her vision in nineteen sixty-five, the bishop told her that if anyone merited a holy vision it would have been the Mother Superior—not a young orphan in nineteen thirty-four. Mind you, by the nineteen sixties Sister Angela been made a full Sister, but they packed her off to work in the Gemelli Hospital in Rome and told her to keep quiet about her visions if she ever wanted to return."

"I'd have used it as an excuse to leave," said Matt thoughtfully.

"Take no notice of him," said Zoé. "So how did these visions become public knowledge?"

"That's where K7 come in," said Leanne. "The Sisters used to run the hospital, but they only spoke French. Ten years ago a team of professionals took over and rebuilt the whole place. Dr. Kappa was put in charge, and he wanted to attract wealthy English-speaking patients. So he gave the French Sisters the elbow and recruited nurses who could all speak English."

Matt examined the grounds floating on his coffee. "But they left this old Sister there?"

"Dr. Kappa heard about Sister Angela's lady in the garden and thought the publicity might be a good way of attracting patients." The nurse undid yet another button on her thin blouse. "So they called her back from Rome, got the story out of her, and wrote it up with the help of an advertising agency."

"Now who's being cynical?" asked Matt.

Leanne sounded surprised. "Am I? I don't mean to be."

Zoé fixed Matt with a look that brought him to a temporary silence. "I imagine there is a problem?" she said softly.

"There is. Sister Angela claims she never said the lady appeared where they built the clinic. She says it was higher up the hill."

Matt finished his coffee—it was warmer than the first cup—and stood up, accidentally knocking his cane chair backwards onto the floor with a clatter that brought the rest of the bar to silence. The whole ridiculous nature of the conversation was like a rapidly deflating balloon. "You want me to spend my holiday investigating a top medical center because they misquoted some old nun? No way, lady. No way."

Laura looked up, her face filled with anxiety. "There's something wrong with the clinic, but I don't know who to tell."

"Do you have a friend at work?" asked Matt.

"There's Mazie Meyran." Just for a moment Leanne Corbin's expression lit up. "She's from New Mexico, too. Sure, we've often talked about the clinic, but I don't think she'd understand. I have money. I could employ you."

As Matt picked his chair up, Zoé said quietly, "I'm sure there is more than Leanne has told us."

"Do you know anything about icons?" Leanne asked suddenly.

"Pop icons?" asked Matt.

"Religious icons," said Leanne patiently. "You know, paintings of Christ and Mary and the saints. Sometimes they're covered in gold or silver, except for their hands and faces."

"Matt knows what icons are," said Zoé firmly.

"I'm talking about Russian icons," Leanne continued. "Can you get large ones?"

"They're things that go in your pocket," said Matt.

Leanne disagreed. "They're much larger than that. I think some of them are three or four feet high."

"You're asking the wrong person." Matt dropped a pile of euro coins on the table and walked to the door. "I think icons are things you fold up in a little box and carry about with you. Get a book from the library."

Leanne looked distraught.

Matt felt guilty. "I'm sort of interested, I admit it. How about we meet again on Sunday? In this bar? Get me some of the clinic's literature and do a bit of investigating for yourself over the next few days." He glanced at Zoé and noticed she was nodding encouragingly. "We've rented a small house in Avignon. Here's the address if you need to see us earlier." He wrote it on a paper napkin.

"You still don't understand about the clinic." Leanne sounded agitated.

"Are they harming their patients?" Matt didn't want to let the nurse go off in tears. Zoé wouldn't forgive him for days.



Leanne Corbin shook her head. "I don't think so. If they are, I can't prove it. People are getting better all the time. Zoé knows how good they are. They have some of the most advanced facilities in Europe. They gave me the job because I'm American."

"So why are the French Sisters still there?" asked Matt.

"Like I said, the Sisters don't speak English. That's why the new owners replaced them. The Sisters are allowed to share the site, but they have their own buildings."

"I suppose it makes the place respectable," said Matt sardonically. "The patients catch sight of the nuns and think God is working in the wards."

"They don't have wards." Leanne sounded far away. "Just private rooms. Something Sister Angela said is bothering me. She said she's never told anyone about the third vision."

"But she told you?" asked Matt.

"Only a bit, and I'm not sure I believed her. It was something about a pope dying here at Tourvillon. Whatever it was, she's really worried about something she thinks she overheard one of the surgeons say." She shook her head and seemed to come back to the present. "I still don't know what to do with the envelope."

"What was in it?" asked Matt.

The security man from the clinic was drinking alone and Matt noticed he definitely glanced their way occasionally.

"I was in the surgeon's room and saw something on the wall above his desk." Leanne bit her lip. "That's when I realized I couldn't give the envelope back."

"Okay, so hand it to the police."

Leanne put her hand to her mouth. "For all I know, the local *gendarmes* might be part of K7. I can't risk showing it to anyone."

"Not even us?" asked Zoé.

"I haven't discussed it with Alain yet. He's my husband. It could put him in danger. He's not very good at keeping things to himself." Leanne forced an embarrassed laugh and took Zoé by the arm. "I'm sorry, Zo, I don't want to spoil your holiday. But when I heard you talking about private detectives I was going to ask if you could get me some bugs." She looked red with embarrassment. "It's stupid, but I'd love to know what Dr. Kappa and Dr. Bernetti are saying in private."

"I wouldn't bother," said Matt. "It might be rude."

Leanne started to laugh more freely now. "I'm on duty again tonight. I'll poke around and see if I can make some sense of it all. I'll get you the whole enchilada. And you'll meet me here next Sunday morning? That's a promise?" Her eyes sparkled. "When the French pronounce my name they make it sound like a sort of French lion." Her laughter was more innocent than fierce. "Lion Woman—that's what my buddies call me!" And she buttoned up her blouse. "I think it's time I got rolling."

Then she was gone, slipping into the swarm of tourists who were searching for cheap souvenirs, before their obligatory tour around the gaunt Papal Palace.

"Do not forget to see the doctor about the headaches," Zoé called, but it was unlikely Leanne Corbin heard.

Matt undid his shirt, immune to any comments from Zoé about showing his chest. He could feel the morning heat building up. The man in the bright shirt had already slipped away unnoticed.

"Has a pope ever died here?"

Zoé pulled a face. "Since nineteen thirty-four? If so, I think Leanne would have told us."

Matt breathed out heavily. "You're a nurse. Is she cuckoo?"

"She is worried."

"But not cuckoo?"

"Why?"

"Because I found what she said about K7 interesting." He turned to make sure they were alone. "Ken Habgood's in the Freemasons, though I'm not supposed to know." He laughed. "He showed me an article from his Sunday paper last week. It had something about K7 in it. Ken boasted he had a client who was a member. They're a wealthy group."

"Wealthy? That does not, I think, sound like a client of your Ken."

"He had Ken summed up. Never offered him membership. The K stands for Knights, but I can't remember what the Seven bit is."

"Knights of Saint John?" suggested Zoé. "They used to run hospitals in the middle ages."

"No, not Saint John. Anyway, they don't run hospitals. I don't know if K7 are good or bad news, but they've got to be something like Freemasons."

"And you think they are doing something illegal at the Clinic of the Little Sisters?"

Matt shrugged and could feel the sweat sticking his shirt to his back. "You know what secret societies can be like. The ordinary members rarely get a chance to find out what their chiefs are up to. Look, if you think Leanne Corbin is sane, I'll give Ken a call and see if he's still got that paper."

Zoé's eyes flashed. "We are on our holidays, Matt Rider. Yes, I think Leanne is sane, but you are not phoning Ken." Her eyes became serious as she tapped out each word with a finger on his bare chest. "Promise you will not speak to Ken while we are away?"

"Okay, Zo!"

"*Attention*," warned Zoé, resorting to her native French. "Use that name once more and Nurse Champanelle will never play the flute for you again."

Matt frowned. He loved the way Zoé could bring music alive with her silver flute. "I wonder what it is they're doing up there at the clinic."

"Nothing that is your business. Now, Matt, do you promise not to speak to Ken?"

He thought for a moment before nodding dutifully. "Promise." It was a promise he'd keep. He wouldn't speak to Ken. And if he went to the Internet café to send Ken an email, Zoé would ask what he was doing. He had to find a way to send a fax.

## Chapter 6

## **Convent of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon**

THE AFTERNOON sky above Avignon was a beautiful shade of blue, like the color of Heaven. To Sister Angela it was the only color visible outside the high window. The helicopter was back again, the noisy machine disturbing her devotions, frightening the black kites that had been soaring overhead. The birds of prey had ruled the sky over Tourvillon ever since her childhood, and probably for an eternity before that.

The Sister put her shabby but much loved-book of prayers and devotions on the small table and went to the window, standing on the stone floor in her bare feet. Shoes were only for wearing outside, and rules must be obeyed—most of the time. She yearned to see down into the grounds but the window was too high in the wall of white painted stone.

It was uncharitable to think such things, but to all intents she was a prisoner. She recalled how it had once been different, walking with the Sisters through the gardens, pulling the tips from the lavender and rubbing them between her fingers. Rows of purple flowers, and the blue of the sky. Times spent talking to the sick in the clinic. Freedom to walk within the gardens. She smiled at the memories. The scent of the plants was surely the scent of Heaven.

Of course there had also been times of trial. They started when the American doctor and his team came. Reverend Mother, may God bless her, had said it was all right. She said they were decent men come to heal the sick and care for the dying.

She sat on the corner of the hard bed. This black steel framed bed could be her solace from the world, in a more agreeable room. A room with a lower window. A door without a lock.

Dr. Kappa was using her. It was like a rape. The thought made her blush. She was not supposed to know about such things. But she did. Reverend Mother would accuse her of unclean thoughts if she knew. But Reverend Mother did not know, because thoughts like this were too secret to share with anyone except God.

There were all sorts of secrets. Dr. Kappa had taken her secret conversation with the Lady and distorted it. It was hard not to have uncharitable thoughts about Dr. Kappa.

Sister Angela frowned as her age-old fingers slipped lightly through the rosary with an ease that came only after decades of discipline. It was like rape if you tried to get something beautiful from somebody who did not want to surrender it, tried to get it by force. The young men in the town had been like that a long time ago. But that was before she had given herself to the Lord.

Bad things were happening at the Convent of the Little Sisters. Perhaps the Lady really did come to warn her about it all those years ago. They said the vision was just a dream, but she knew it was real. She banged on the door in frustration.

A heavy door. A high window. The surgeon had told her he would have her declared insane if she told anyone what he had done to the man in the hospital. It would be terrible to be declared insane.

Something horrifying was about to happen. She had overheard the surgeon say a dreadful thing.

He was going to kill the Holy Father.

## Chapter 7

### The Vatican

"HOLINESS?"

Archbishop Stephen Valdieri approached the large bed in the Papal apartment. The Holy Father had scarcely eaten any of his lunch, and he now lay partly covered by a single white sheet, his eyes closed. God forbid he might even be dead. One of the Sisters should be in constant attendance.

Valdieri coughed discreetly. "Holiness?" he repeated.

The Holy Father's right arm jerked in what appeared to be an involuntary movement. The sudden response startled Valdieri as he bent forward.

"Is that you, Stephen?"

Valdieri stood back at what seemed to be an appropriate distance. In his early fifties, he felt very much the young man here. "You have been asleep, Holiness. I did not intend to alarm you."

The Pope tried to pull himself upright but got no further than raising his head a short distance from the pillow. "I was dreaming of my childhood days, Stephen; of a time of good health. Do not leave me. Nobody tells me the truth, except you."

Valdieri took a deep breath at what seemed rather a sweeping dismissal of the honesty among Vatican staff. "I will sit with you for a few minutes, Holiness." He pulled the folds of his black cassock from around his back and sat carefully on the bedside chair. Then he kissed the large ring on the Pope's hand. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Tell me about my health, Stephen." The Holy Father's pale hand of squat fingers stayed out from the sheet. "You need not keep anything back."

Valdieri regretted his decision to call on the Holy Father. It had only been a courtesy visit, and now he was facing the question he dreaded. No one, absolutely no one, seemed prepared to discuss the Holy Father's chances of survival face to face. "I am an archbishop." He tried to look helpless. "An expert in the Scriptures and papal security."

"You are sounding stuffy."

Valdieri wanted to be cautious. "Your personal physicians should be here to answer questions of a medical nature."

The Holy Father attempted a laugh, but it sounded hollow. "Do you really think they would tell me anything sensible?"

Valdieri found his eyes meeting the eyes of the Vicar of Christ. This was not an occasion for lies or even half-truths. But he would endeavor to sound optimistic. "The Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon near Avignon has graciously offered to treat you. The Clinic has a track record second to none."

"Ah, yes, I have heard stories of their healings. Maybe I will get an opportunity to try out the French I learned to speak as a young man. It is a holy site is it not,

Stephen?" The Holy Father's head was back on the pillow now, his eyes slowly closing. "I understand you are a churchman who believes in miracles."

Valdieri laughed. "I am certain that miracles did not cease with the end of the Apostolic Age. I would never dismiss the possibility of divine healing."

The Pope's eyes stayed closed but he was obviously paying attention. "I would appreciate your honesty, Stephen. Is my health beyond human help? I want your answer, not the answer you have been instructed to give me."

Valdieri decided not to put on a pretence of being offended. "I cannot possibly discuss medical matters with you, Holiness. I am not qualified in medicine."

"You are sounding stuffy again, Archbishop. You came from New York speaking impeccable English, Italian and French, able to eavesdrop on every conversation. I was hoping you could tell me what my staff are saying."

Valdieri shook his head. "I do not listen to gossip, Holiness."

"If that is true, then you are in the wrong job in security." The Holy Father's smile faltered. "But Avignon seems right to you?"

"Indeed it does."

The eyes stayed closed. "*There is a way that seems right to a man...*"

"...*But the end is the way of death.*" Valdieri shook his head as he finished the quotation from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. He had certainly walked right into that one.

The Pontiff sounded relaxed. "I believe the writer was referring to spiritual death, not physical. I wish to sleep again now, Stephen. Security, as you so rightly say, is your expertise, so I shall endeavor to sleep soundly." He opened his eyes again and smiled weakly. "I trust you will endeavor to keep the possibility of death by misadventure to an acceptable level."

## Chapter 8

### Avignon

"ZOÉ, ARE you still awake?"

Matt was, and his mind had been running wild with crazy thoughts. Just finding a way to get the fax off to Ken Habgood had been enough to make him sleepless. Deceiving the public on a daily basis at work was nothing compared to fooling a woman. Realizing that the bar had a fax number on the heading of its menu had been a triumph.

The waiter who served their evening meal was ready enough to take a small backhander to let him stand in the office and send it off. Ken would find it on his machine tomorrow when he turned up at eight-thirty, half asleep, poking around at the mail.

"Do you like it here in Provence?" Zoé sounded surprisingly alert.

Matt turned towards her in the bed. "It's a good place for a holiday."

The narrow street outside was quiet now. The locals had gone indoors, leaving their cars parked tightly nose to tail for the night. The town was a maze of twisting streets and alleys where it was easy to get lost. He loved it already.

There was a long pause before Zoé spoke again. It was as though she was summoning up the courage. "Would you like to live in Avignon?"

"I want to stay with you, Zo." He put a hand gently across her shoulder.

"It's *Zoé!*" She did not respond to his touch.

He increased the firmness of his hold. "You have something in mind?"

"You could teach English here."

"Me? Teach? How could I teach?"

"And me, I could get a job nursing at the Clinic of the Little Sisters. That would be a job fantastique. Wealthy Americans go there in secret."

"How do you know, if it's secret?"

"Some of the patients, they do not mind the publicity. Film stars are torn between fame and privacy. You are right, most wealthy people dread the press making reports on their health. The papers make up the terrible stories even if you only come for a verruca."

"Or piles." Matt lay down again.

"Ah, there is perhaps good reason to keep that a secret from the press. But the clinic does a lot more than treat the piles."

"The Clinic of the Sisters of the Little Hemorrhoids."

"Or the Little Sisters of the Golden Piles," mused Zoé.

Matt shook his head. "Hasn't got the same ring to it somehow. Yes, I can see why they moved on to higher things. If they're so famous, how come they're out here in the sticks?"

"The sticks? Ah, *le bled perdu*. Leanne Corbin said the site of the clinic is like Lourdes. A miracle place. You cannot control where these things are going to be. Can you imagine someone having a holy vision in the middle of Harley Street in London?"

Matt plumped up his pillow. He felt more wide-awake than ever now. "It would be convenient."

"Too convenient. I would like to get the literature and read about Sister Angela."

"We're meeting Leanne next Sunday. She said she'd get a brochure for us."

"Sunday is a long time, Matt."

"I thought we were having a holiday."

"Perhaps I am interested because I am a nurse. It is what I call an *intérêt professionnel*. The Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon is perhaps the most highly regarded medical organization, even though they have stayed small. There is a waiting list of people wanting to spend a fortune on their treatment."

"I still can't say I've heard of them."

"You would if you worked in medicine. They specialize in the early diagnosis and treatment of the cancers. Diagnosis and immediate treatment. Much of it is preventative. Brilliant, but not popular with some medical specialists of course. There is plenty of jealousy in the medical world. It is the same in most academic life. But me, I would love to work there."

The pillow felt hard and uncomfortable. Matt put his arm round Zoé. "I like England." Once again she seemed unsettled about their relationship.

"It would be a good excuse to get away from 'Abgood Securities. Even on holiday you do not forget your Ken."

"What do you mean?" He realized he had allowed his hold on Zoé to loosen; an involuntary action surely. "You're the one who's going on about Leanne Corbin and her suspicions, not me."

"Do you think Ken will be able to find out about K7 for you?"

He tried to sound sleepy. "What's that?"

"The fax you sent to Ken this evening. I think perhaps it was to ask him about the K7?"

He sat upright in the large wooden-framed bed. The springs creaked loudly. "Fax?"

"Matt Rider, I am talking about the fax you sent from the bar. You remember, when you said you were taking me out to the most romantic meal in town. Perhaps you think I am stupid."

"What are you talking about?"

"First you have the long talk with the waiter by the bar, and then you go with him to the back. He did not know what you sent on the fax, but he had the phone number." She picked up her pillow and hit him over the head. "Look, here is a lesson most important for you, Saint George. It will, I think, come in handy for your work one day."

"Tell me."

"Someone who can be bribed as easily as your waiter will also take a bribe to betray you."

"When I went to the men's room?"

"Uh-huh."

"How much did you pay him?"

"I gave him the kiss most passionate."

Matt groaned. Not that he believed her. "I told you the truth though. I didn't speak to Ken. Now then, how about a kiss most passionate for me?"

Zoé turned away. She sounded as though she was crying.

## Chapter 9

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

MARIO BERNETTI stood by the scrub room sink and peeled the bloodstained gloves from his hands. He could feel sweat standing on his forehead in spite of the air conditioning. The gloves slipped off with a snap, allowing a wave of air to brush over his fingers.

Four hours in the operating room, following the needle biopsy for a tissue sample. Tonight's craniotomy on Goldstein had turned into a major. The large tumor lay in a swab dish on the stainless steel table.

"Thank you, Nurse Corbin." Bernetti held his arms high while she untied the green gown from the rear. It always paid to be on good terms with the staff; a

lesson he had learned in Rome. Those had been good days, with wealthy Roman friends and good business contacts. Just one cloud had appeared, and the cloud had followed him here to Avignon. "You help me with my boots, nurse."

He braced himself as a feeling of exhaustion passed through his body. It must be close on midnight. Several letters needed attention. Money that was owing; a new client to be supplied. Jim Kappa's warning had been devastating. The Vatican had singled out the clinic for an investigation. It seemed that Avignon was still a dirty word with the papacy.

It had always been so, from the schisms of the Middle Ages. Surely the Church in Rome had forgiven Avignon by now. But Archbishop Valdieri had already been here twice, making everyone uneasy. The Holy Father's committees could be very thorough. Valdieri was unwelcome. Valdieri was a rat.

"Thank you, nurse." Bernetti sat on the low chair and raised his feet as the white surgery boots were gently removed. Jim insisted that everyone used English within the clinic, an instruction that made him irritable. English was a difficult language, and sometimes he suspected the nurses were smiling as he spoke.

"Nurse Corbin, I want you to put the tumor in the sample bag. Get it ready for an immediate biopsy. I arrange for it to be done quickly. Mr. Goldstein's specialist, he want to examine a section of it in America."

The malignant lesion in Goldstein's brain had been totally life threatening. Its existence had been there on the x-rays and CT scans for everyone to see, but its severity had not been apparent. He had only been able to make the conclusive diagnosis after opening the cranium with the drill and knife. It was often like this. Goldstein's specialist in the States understood the need for exploratory surgery, and he would willingly accept the reason for immediate operative work.

"Sorry, Nurse Corbin, what you say?"

The nurse had been hovering anxiously. "I was wondering, Dr. Bernetti, if the clinic's Medical Board were connected in any way with the Knights of Saint John."

He laughed at the unexpected question. "The Knights of Saint John? They all die a long time ago. Good men, but they all dead many years. Maybe many hundred years ago; who knows?" He opened the faucet lever on the huge white sink with his left forearm and let the water and liquid soap wash away the talcum powder and the smell of rubber from his delicate hands: hands like a musician's. "Why you ask?"

She seemed embarrassed. "Oh, it's nothing. I thought I heard Dr. Kappa talking about knights the other day."

Bernetti shook his head, sucking his tongue against the back of his teeth several times. "Maybe our work and theirs the same, eh? Knights of Saint John were good men. They care for wounded soldiers. Maybe he say that, Nurse Corbin." He watched her closely as she dropped his soiled gown into the large plastic bin ready for the laundry.

"Yes, Dr. Bernetti, I expect that's what it was."

"You have time to see to this sample before you go home?"

The nurse picked up the swab dish. "No problem. I'm on duty for the rest of the night."



"Maybe there is no end to work in this life. Always something to attend to." He walked towards the shower room, his mind on an urgent and highly confidential email he must send to a colleague in the Vatican.

Fifteen minutes later Bernetti walked down the corridor to the senior staff quarters and opened the door to his luxury suite. The first thing he did was switch on the CD player. The clear tones of a chorister filled the room. He smiled at the purity of the voice. Antonino Lepati singing in Napoli. Boys' voices as innocent as this were a rarity. Delightful.

He let his smile slip away. Nurse Corbin had been following him everywhere lately. Her casual question in the change room had hardly registered until now. The Knights of Saint John? Had she really overheard Jim talking about the Knights? If so, Jim had been careless. He must be told of Nurse Corbin's snooping. Bernetti tutted to himself.

If he couldn't keep his mouth shut, Jim Kappa was a danger to others.

\* \* \* \* \*

STEVE MICHENER couldn't sleep. After the noise and bustle of his Santa Monica apartment, this hospital room seemed too quiet. The nurse had given him something to help him relax but it was having the opposite effect. Fancy being in France; it was all so sudden.

He'd known all along of course. The first doctor in Los Angeles hadn't taken him seriously, and the second had been no better. It was a good thing he could afford to ignore them and go to the best specialist his money could buy. The man had assured him that this facility in France was the greatest. Of course, it had been necessary to pay a few bucks to jump the waiting list, but that was what money was for.

A rising film star. The press were always ready to print his picture. He lay with his head propped on the pillow and stared into the night sky. He'd wanted to keep the window open but the nurse insisted on keeping it closed at night and let the air conditioning keep the temperature stable.

At first he had seen only blackness, but now he was aware of stars. Spots of light, really brilliant stars. Only in the hills outside Los Angeles was the night sky as bright as this.

Blackness.

But now intense dots of light were breaking up the gloom. Flickers of faith like the assurances he had been given by the surgeons here. First the crushing medical opinion—then the pinpoints of hope.

Wave enough money at a problem and it usually goes away. He grinned to himself in spite of his anxiety. That was the Michener philosophy and it seemed to work well enough. He could thank the good Lord for money, and for his own insistence that the pain in his head was not merely related to stress from work, or even to the occasional drink.

He prodded the side of his head cautiously as though his inexpert fingers might discover some hideous lump that had escaped the medics. Or had they already found one but were not saying? The specialists had nodded wisely but revealed little. Tomorrow they would have their drills and knives deep in his brain before he knew it. Hell, it was probably better that way.

The stars now seemed even brighter. He put his hands behind his head. Since the diagnosis, the disturbing pain had become more distinct. The nurse might just as well have given him black coffee instead of white medicine. Hyperactivity, that's what he was suffering from. Maybe it was the change in time zones.

He sighed and tried to get comfortable. Brain surgery tomorrow. Life was a bummer.

That LA specialist had put the show on the road quickly enough. Was it only forty-eight hours ago that he was sitting in the consulting room waiting to hear the results of the tests? Waiting in hope, but knowing the worst—and then hearing it officially. The man who had done the full examination had been adamant: urgent problems needed urgent action, and he knew just the place. A holy site of healing. The public never knew who'd been here for treatment because the press weren't allowed near. The staff could be trusted. All of them. So the consultant said.

He gazed out into the night sky. The stars were beginning to disappear one by one as a large cloud moved slowly across the sky. He fought back the feeling of panic. The stars had been telling him something encouraging. Now the cloud started to rub the message away, like a cleaning cloth sweeping across a blackboard, the shadowy blackness replacing the message of hope. Did the clowns running this clinic really know what they were doing? It was one frigging chance to take, lying unconscious under the lights while they sliced deep into your brain.

The last pinpoint of hope disappeared behind a high bank of cloud.

He felt sick.

Sick and scared.

## Chapter 10

MEMO FROM ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN VALDIERI  
VATICAN SECURITY SERVICES  
TO OTTORINO CARDINAL DELGARDO, CHIEF ADVISER, VATICAN  
MEDICAL ASSEMBLY  
EXTREMELY CONFIDENTIAL

*My Dear Ottorino,*

I have now made two visits to the clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon at Avignon, and I can assure you that the strictest secrecy has been observed on each occasion concerning the nature and purpose of these visits.

Although I consider any threat to the Pontiff's safety to be minimal, in the event that he should be treated at the clinic, the French Premier has provisionally agreed that he will protect the site with a small team from the GIGN, the French Groupement d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale. However, since receiving your last letter I have become aware of a significant shift in the attitude of your staff to the use of the Avignon clinic. Perhaps this is a suitable opportunity for me to place on record my confidence in the work of Dr. Kappa at the Clinic of the Little Sisters.

I enclose a detailed security schedule that can be put into operation at short notice. You may be sure that I join in your prayers for the Holy Father's full recovery.

## Chapter 11

### Tourvillon Village

"WE TOOK a wrong turning somewhere," Matt said with a dry smile.

He had seen Zoé glance deliberately at her watch as he drove the orange Austin Mini into the typically French village square. The journey had taken considerably more than the twenty minutes he'd reckoned on. It had already taken them nearly an hour since leaving the main road.

Bright orange with a black roof, the small car stood out like a currant bun in the window of a *pâtisserie*. Probably the previous owner had painted it orange to disguise the rust. He had wrecked his own car on a surveillance job a year ago, and the Mini was Ken's client's idea of gratitude. The black roof absorbed heat like a sponge, and the leaking sunshine roof had now been permanently sealed shut with silicone. The few parking spaces under the plane trees were already full.

Zoé had made the suggestion at breakfast that they go to see the clinic from the outside. Hopefully she wasn't about to apply for a nursing job at the place. Whatever had been upsetting her last night seemed to have gone onto the back burner this morning.

Two chattering women in black stood in a doorway against a background of peeling brown paint and deep cracks in the stonework. For a moment they looked up, but their gossip seemed to be more interesting than watching visitors.

"It is so quiet," whispered Zoé. Matt pointed to a huge white building on the hill above them. It reminded him of a ski center he knew near Morzine in the French Alps. The structure must have required advanced civil engineering to hold everything firmly in place. A large outcrop of rock in the field below the clinic was the only natural feature to break the smooth hillside. "I thought you said it was small."

"It is a bit of a... what do you say? ... blot."

"You're not still thinking of working there, I hope. The whole place is fenced in. You'd soon get fed up with the security checks going in and out."

Zoé laughed. She was growing more relaxed as the day went on. "Why should I want to come and go? I will find myself the handsome young doctor and stay inside forever."

"He'd die of exhaustion."

"Not necessarily. I would be easy on him. Like I am with you."

Matt wasn't going to take the put-down without protest. "Then I'd bug the place and listen to you groaning and moaning in bed."

"You are disgusting, Matt Rider. How about buying me a coffee after the drive so long?"

Zoé nodded towards the local bar where three large yellow umbrellas protected the tables from the pigeons in the trees above. A middle-aged woman in a wine-stained apron appeared. They were her only customers.

Matt ordered a black coffee for himself and a white one for Zoé. From his shaky bistro chair he studied the cobbled square, complete with traditional village pump in a stone surround.

Zoé kept staring up at the clinic.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Dreaming of your young doctor?"

"I was looking at the black kites circling in the sky. I think perhaps there is a nest on the big rock."

"They look like DC3s, old Dakota aircraft. Is that all that's on your mind?" He knew it wasn't.

Zoé took hold of his hand. "Also, I am thinking about... your work."

He sighed, loudly. "Leave it."

"You do not understand, Matt. I do not wish to stop you working for Ken." She leaned across and gave him a hug.

He looked back up at the hill. "I could hang-glide from the top of there."

Zoé sounded surprised. "You know how to use a hang-glider?"

"I went on an adventure course in the Alps. Hang-gliders, paragliders. It was brilliant. I've been paragliding quite a few times since. I'm almost an expert."

"It is dangerous, I think."

"Well, I'm not about to leap off the top of the hill holding a tablecloth above my head, if that's what's worrying you."

"No, I am not worried about you doing the brave things. A man should be allowed to stretch himself."

"Women also. We could swoop over the Convent and look in the windows."

Zoé sighed. "Matt Rider, you are a dirty old man." He stared at her. He'd meant it as a joke, but Zoé wasn't smiling. Every time she was about to unburden herself something interrupted her. He wished he'd shut up about hang-gliders.

"I'm sorry, Zoé. You wanted to talk about my work."

"Not about your work. You must, I think, do the work you enjoy. But you said you would bug the clinic. The fence it is so high, and there are the guards on the gate."

"What's this, a test?"

"Believe it or not, I am interested. So, tell me how you would do it."

Matt shook his head. "I thought we were on holiday."

Zoé shrugged. "Leanne Corbin, she has got me all disturbed."

"And me. This K7 thing has really got to her."

"At the hospital in Lyon, Leanne was always so calm. I wish we had spent longer talking to her yesterday. So tell me, is it easy to put the bugs in there?"

"It would depend."

"On what?"

"On whether they're expecting to be bugged. It's always much harder to do anything if the target is alert."

"You never tell me much about what you do for Ken."

"That's because you don't like me working for him."

Zoé touched his lips with her fingers. "You are, I think, too easily upset. Pretend I am your client and I am ever so rich."

Matt moved back to allow the woman to place two large cups and saucers on the table. The coffee in his cup looked satisfyingly dark and fresh; the stains on the outside looked old.

He waited for the woman to leave. "I'd ask innocent-sounding questions down here in the village. Find out how the clinic staff come and go. What special passes their visitors need. How security works. I can't just rush in there with a pocketful of bugs. I'd need a few days just keeping watch."

"A few days? No wonder Ken he is so wealthy—if he charges by the hour." Zoé giggled unexpectedly. "What else are you going to look for?"

"I'd check out the phone lines. They're never underground—not out in the country. I'd find a spot on the hillside where the overhead line can't be seen from the road, and climb the pole and put a pick-up on it. It would have to be advanced, to handle multiple calls from a business. I could leave a voice-activated recorder running, then get on with the rest of my plans."

"They might use the cell phones, and not have phone lines."

Matt tried his coffee, turning the cup to avoid the stains. It tasted even better than the coffee in the bar in Avignon. "Bright girl. Then I'd have a receiver that would automatically sweep the frequencies until I found them talking. Extremely expensive, but with the right equipment you are able to do that with digital phones nowadays. Anyway, I can't see a mobile phone mast on the hill or in the village."

"Can they detect your pickup on their phone line?"

"If they look for it. There's a thing they can use called a telephone tap defeater. It takes all the power my pickup needs and stops me listening. But that would mean they know someone is onto them, and it gets very technical then -- really advanced espionage. I could use a sophisticated induction pickup, and they're unlikely to detect that."

"It sounds so easy."

"That's because we're sitting here, not trying to tap a line in the middle of a field. Espionage and counter-espionage depends on the skill of the operators, and on who has the most money. But as soon as they find a bug they never talk openly again, that's for sure."

Zoé sounded excited. "I can see some overhead wires."

He drew his breath in sharply. "If you don't know what it is, don't mess with it. You're looking at the power cables to the site. See that rock with the flying Dakotas?" He pointed to where the black kites were soaring. "The main electricity supply runs past it on those poles."

"Well, it looks like a phone line to me." Zoé stirred her coffee idly. "So you have climbed the pole and managed to get the pickup on there when the night is dark. So where would you sit with your receiver? Out on the hill for everyone to see you?"

Matt finished his coffee. The after-taste was something to savor. Why couldn't all coffee be like this? "It depends on how advanced my telephone tap is. Give me a basic one with a small radio and I'd have to stay within twenty or thirty yards. But I wouldn't sit in the car. That would be a dead giveaway. I'd park in the village and

hide myself in the bushes below the rock. Give me a good pick-up and I could be anywhere within a few miles."

"Then you would be safe," commented Zoé as she drained her cup, grounds and all.

"It gets better," said Matt. "I needn't even come to France. I could stay home and use my phone to get hooked in. It's called an Infinity Receiver. It transmits and receives on the international phone network. It's not legal, but all you need is some expensive kit, a simple code, and you're away."

Zoé nodded. "I think perhaps they would catch you climbing the pole to put a simple tap there."

"I've not been caught yet. Anyway, a PI worth employing wouldn't mess around in the open. He'd get inside the building to plant bugs."

Zoé laughed. "Do you dress as the milk deliveryman?"

Matt brushed a few crumbs off the table. Someone had been here earlier eating croissants. "People are suspicious when a stranger suddenly replaces a regular. A service engineer is best. No one expects to know him, and the job gets me into the offices. I can bring loads of gear because I'm supposed to have a tool box with me."

"That is good."

"I need to watch the main gate first, and see if they let certain visitors in without a fuss. They're the sort of people to impersonate."

"And if that fails?"

"I could always try digging in under the back fence—as long as they've not got microwave or IR scanners along the wire."

"IR scanners?"

"Infrared. They scan along the boundary with an invisible light beam. You don't know they're there, because you can't see them. Break the beam and the alarm goes off."

"So what do you do?"

"Persuade someone on the inside to turn it off for a few minutes."

"Like the man in the stores at Grieves' yard?"

Matt nodded, remembering the job he had done on the first day he had met Zoé. The start of their relationship had not gone smoothly then, and once again Zoé seemed to have a problem he was unable to fathom.

"It takes time. And money. That's why it's best to go in as a visitor, perhaps using a forged letter. It's easy to print fake invitations and letter headings nowadays with a computer. I'd need to get hold of a genuine letter from the clinic and scan it to make a perfect copy of the heading. I told you, it takes planning."

Zoé nodded excitedly. "All right, I think you are now inside. And then?"

"You've made it sound easy. Okay, I'm in. I plant miniature bugs in key locations, then come out and activate them later."

"They sweep for bugs. Is that what they do?"

"It is. And that's why I said I activate them later. I'm talking quality UHF gear now. You said money isn't important. I'd have a transmitter coded for each bug, but I keep the bugs switched off so they're almost impossible to detect. At that stage they'd be waiting to receive a signal rather than transmitting. I need to know when the hospital does a sweep, and make sure I send a signal to switch the bugs

off until they've finished. Anyway, most hospitals aren't going to be looking for bugs. Not the electronic sort. Bed bugs more likely. Or viral bugs in the wards."

Zoé reached over and hit him gently on the shoulder. "Not in my hospital, Inspector Rider."

"Chief Inspector."

She reached out across the top of the table again, this time taking hold of his hand. "I wish you had stayed with the police."

Matt shook his head. "Don't keep on. Why all the interest in bugging?"

"Since we met Leanne I find detective work rather exciting." Zoé lifted her empty cup. "Share a croissant with me, Chief Inspector?"

Matt signaled to the woman who was sitting behind a fly screen made of long strips of brown plastic, reading a torn copy of *Paris Match*. The thought of salty French butter made him order two.

Matt sat back as the woman returned with two large croissants, butter, and a dark red *confiture* in a chipped glass dish. The second cup of coffee looked as refreshingly dark as the first one, but the cup looked no cleaner.

Zoé cut vigorously into her croissant. "You have been coming back in so bad a mood lately, but I think perhaps I have got the wrong idea of your work."

He would normally have retorted that his mood had been good: it was Zoé who'd been uptight, not him. But Provence seemed too peaceful for a squabble. The croissants were unexpectedly tough. Crumbs scattered over the table as his knife dug in. The earlier customer must have been an expert to leave so few crumbs. More likely, the pigeons had been busy.

"Ken takes the best jobs for himself. I can't blame him. It's his agency, and I was lucky to get work after leaving the police without a decent reference. I just wish he'd make more use of my training. Half my time seems to be spent checking up on husbands and wives for suspicious partners."

He jumped up as a wasp got caught in his hair, and banged his head on the edge of the yellow umbrella. A large lump of dark gray dirt fell onto the table. "Let's not wait for Leanne to get a brochure. We'll drive up now and ask for one. Let's see how hot their security is."

Zoé nodded. "You make the surveillance sound so exciting, Matt. I think perhaps I could like planting the bugs and tapping the telephones all day long."

"I think I could, too," reflected Matt gloomily.

"Cheer up, Chief Inspector, you can finish my croissant."

## Chapter 12

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE WINDOW that had been blackness last night was now filled with streaming rays of sunshine. Steve Michener had already taken a phone-call from his agent in Los Angeles assuring him that no one in Hollywood suspected he was in for medical treatment.

"Observation," he'd been quick to point out.

"Sure, Steve, in for observation."

But the summer sun did nothing to dispel the bad vibes that had accompanied him all the way from the States. This afternoon they were going to yank something out of his brain while they had his skull cut open. The attractive nurse was doing her best to soothe him as she pulled firmly and expertly at the bedding.

"You can get back in now, Mr. Michener. Admiring the view, I expect. Provence is the best part of France."

"You're from the States. Tell me your name, nurse."

"Nurse Corbin, Mr. Michener."

"I guess you come from... where?"

"Albuquerque."

"And I come from LA. You look beautiful this morning, Nurse Corbin." Suddenly he felt on a high. It was the sunshine that did it. Or maybe they'd slipped him something to help get through the day. "Have you ever seen so many orange roofs in one place? I guess a guy could make a killing selling roofing tiles around this part." He had to force the laugh.

He stood by the open window in his pale blue silk pajamas, looking through the thin fly screen and feeling totally in control of the situation. He could take any liberty he wanted with this woman in the smart white uniform. "See that quaint village? There's a little square, and yellow umbrellas by the snack bar on the sidewalk. Do they ever let us go down there? I'd sure like to have a look at the place from up close, with a beautiful woman on my arm. What's your first name, Nurse Corbin?"

"The village is called Tourvillon. It's a pretty place," she said, standing a little distance away as she looked from the window to where he was pointing.

He noticed that she left his question unanswered. She wore no perfume. A woman without perfume seemed quaint. "It's all pretty around here. Just like the nurses." But he kept his hands to himself. He'd have to watch his step and control his natural urges. He needed the medical support staff for consolation, not sexual satisfaction. "Am I going to be all right, nurse?" The question filled his whole mind; filled it every minute.

She turned away. "You must ask Dr. Kappa."

"But I'm asking *you*. Doctors sometimes tell lies."

"I'm a nurse. I'd put my life in their hands," she said with a brief smile.

"If you're that confident, how about taking my place?"

That made her smile for longer. "They're very gifted here, Mr. Michener. You'll soon be on your way back to the States without a care in the world. Please get back into bed. I have to give you a pre-med, an injection to make you sleepy. That brain of yours needs a rest. I'll leave the window open. It's a lovely morning. Can you smell the lavender in the garden? It's glorious. Happy dreams."

The needle went into his arm with a sharp stab.

\* \* \* \* \*

JIM KAPPA reclined in the black leather armchair in front of the window of his air-conditioned office. Masonic groups had been fair game for popes down the ages, but where would this one draw the line? Was the Pope scheming to root out



the Knights of the Holy Succession? Surely the Vatican wouldn't see it through, not when the Holy Father came here and found out just how successful the staff were at Tourvillon. Successful and powerful.

Mario Bernetti was probably panicking unnecessarily about Nurse Corbin's questions. A new thought made him frown. Had Leanne Corbin been put into the clinic as a plant? A spy for the Vatican? He laughed to himself. No, it wasn't their way of doing things—not with a woman.

He swung the chair round to face into the room. So what was Mario Bernetti fussing about? A nurse asks an innocent question about the Knights of Saint John. All right, he could keep an eye on her, but why did Bernetti assume the Vatican was behind her question? He felt a momentary panic. Perhaps Nurse Corbin was working for the popular press.

He must have a word with security; get Maxwell Wilcox to check out every detail of her background. Surely Maxwell would have initiated a full check before the nurse joined the staff. He picked up the phone and turned back to look out of the window. Avignon stood as a brilliant cluster of terracotta tiles in the summer sunshine. Too many roads criss-crossed the landscape, but otherwise the picture was idyllic.

"Maxwell? I want you in my office."

Kappa reckoned he could usefully spend half an hour with his head of security. Michener's op wasn't for a couple of hours. Archbishop Valdieri was digging for dirt on secret societies. A pity if there was a snooper in the camp.

Maxwell Wilcox, the slim American, entered the room wearing his navy blazer displaying that awful double row of gold colored buttons. The embossed insignia on each one looked like handcuffs. Could they be Maxwell's perception of the symbol of his profession?

"I want a check, Maxwell, a full check, on a member of the nursing staff."

Maxwell went to the computer and typed the code to gain access to the site network. He smiled briefly. "A nurse? What name, Jim?"

"Corbin. Leanne Corbin."

A few taps of the keys brought up a full screen of text, and Maxwell read quickly through the skimpy details. "Trained in New Mexico, first appointment in Albuquerque, worked in France for three years, then joined us from the cancer unit in Lyon, France. That was five years ago. Clearance is fine. Good CV. Speaks French well. No children. Her husband works in one of the local industries. Is there a problem, Jim?"

"Probably not—if she's been with us for several years." Kappa pointed to the monitor. "I hoped you'd have something more recent. Does your team keep any other records?"

"We make jottings on staff in a separate folder on the computer. Mostly it's just temporary stuff that we junk every few months." Maxwell tapped the keys again and a new screen appeared. "Sunday. That's only yesterday." He sounded surprised. "Leanne Corbin was seen talking to a man and a woman in a bar in Avignon. The two words used here are 'rather intensely'. They were looking at a map of this area, which must be why Cranburg thought it worth recording. We have to watch for staff making contact with the press in their free time. And there's an earlier note that she was using a computer in an Internet café in

Avignon... last month. An Internet search on something. I'll speak with Cranburg. Maybe he'll have more information."

"Do we know what Leanne Corbin was talking about with this man and woman?"

"I doubt if we even know their names. We wouldn't normally follow this one up. Want me to find out more?"

"See if you can find out what the Internet search was about." But Kappa found his mind turning to the imminent surgery. Steve Michener was famous. He was also wealthy.

Maxwell looked up quickly. "A man and a woman came to the main gate earlier this morning. They wanted a brochure on the clinic. They had an old English Mini. You know, a little sedan. As far as I know they went away when we told them to write."

"As far as you know?" Kappa broke off his mental preparation for the delicate surgery. As Senior Consultant he expected to be kept informed of everything suspicious. "I'm paranoid about my staff getting involved with journalists. There are times when you disappoint me, Maxwell; I want you to know that."

"Sure thing, Jim." Maxwell Wilcox nodded thoughtfully.

Kappa frowned. "The last thing we need is a member of staff who can't keep her mouth shut."

\* \* \* \* \*

ARCHBISHOP VALDIERI looked up from the final draft of the schedule for the urgent relocation of the Pontiff. The Vatican buildings seemed unusually quiet.

The plan in front of him was so confidential that he could not even consult with the heads of other departments. Reporters were always watching the movements of Vatican personnel, and already there was speculation in the press concerning the Holy Father's health.

The Holy Father could hardly leave Rome with no one knowing, which was why the media had to be given a convincing but misleading reason. So far no one had been able to think of one persuasive enough.

The dry air in the Vatican made his eyes run. Valdieri blew his nose with a strong paper tissue. The papacy could be on its way back to Avignon; but this time, God willing, only for a matter of weeks, not a century.

He smiled as he considered the opportunity that lay ahead. With the French national security forces, the GIGN, guarding the site, he'd end up at Kappa's clinic with time on his hands. He had long suspected that there was another secret at Tourvillon. This was his opportunity to gain glory. He signed the final document. The visit was going ahead. Now all he needed was a cover story to account for the Holy Father's visit.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE MOTHER superior leaned forward, conscious that her performance might be perceived as a rather forced act of servitude.

"You must try and be at peace, Sister Angela." She wiped the salty drops from the elderly Sister's cheek with the corner of a spotless hanky, while stooping so as

not to appear overbearing. The reddened rims to the small eyes indicated that Sister Angela had been crying for some time.

"It used to be so lovely here, Reverend Mother."

The Mother Superior shook her head. Could she really offer comfort? How did the Sisters see her? As imperious? She believed that some said so. She took comfort that her thin face and gently hooked nose gave the essential look of inbred authority, while her pale olive skin surely toned down the severity of her face. Some of the Sisters whispered that she was of noble Italian birth but they never asked her outright about her background. Perhaps they knew. Did it matter? Many noteworthy people came from misbegotten sexual relationships.

"Nurse Leanne Corbin is coming here to see you again, Sister."

The elderly Sister's eyes gleamed, the beads of the rosary temporarily neglected. "Oh, I am so pleased." In the stance of a little child, Sister Angela clutched her hands to her chest. "When is she coming, Reverend Mother?"

"Soon, Sister. She is helping on an exceptionally complicated operation. We must continue to pray for the patient's healing. But as soon as Dr. Kappa has finished he will allow Nurse Leanne to come across." She stood erect now. It was the only way to make the point. "I was helping in the clinic office yesterday. Dr. Kappa told me you were seen walking around the clinic again, Sister Angela. Please remember that times are difficult for all of us." She nodded towards the door. "I had so hoped we could dispense with the lock."

Sister Angela ignored the reprimand. "Did Nurse Leanne ask to see me?"

"I believe she enjoys your company, Sister. You must endeavor to stay strong in the spirit, my child. Pray to the Lord Jesus constantly. One day we will all meet with Him, for good or bad."

The thought of Heaven seemed to bring peace to the frail figure. "It is a blessed thought, Reverend Mother, for I know for certain that Jesus is my Savior."

The Mother Superior nodded in agreement as she pulled gently at the Sister's large wimple of white linen to straighten it. "You must never neglect the appearance of your habit, Sister Angela."

"No, Reverend Mother."

"Care in the wearing of our Lord's apparel must not be confused with pride, Sister Angela. It is important to learn that."

The aged head nodded faintly. "Is it permitted for Nurse Leanne to walk with me in the gardens, Reverend Mother?"

The Mother Superior smiled at the innocence. "The day is warm, and we will see. You are much stronger now but you must be sure to take your medicine. Dr. Kappa is concerned for your health."

"Perhaps I have been too long in this world, Reverend Mother."

"Who is to know the answer to that, Sister Angela? It is not for us to decide when we have fulfilled our allotted span in life."

"No, Reverend Mother, that decision rests in the hands of another."

"It does indeed, Sister Angela."

## Chapter 13

### Avignon

ON THURSDAY afternoon high clouds drifted in from the north. By evening a cool breeze gave some relief from the heat as Matt and Zoé drove back from exploring the hill villages of Provence. Zoé reminded Matt that they were still waiting for news from Ken about K7.

Matt drew into a parking space in the center of town and pulled the handbrake on hard. "Do you remember how Leanne Corbin asked us about Russian icons? Let's find an Internet café and do a search for her. Then I'll phone Ken."

"Ask him to send us some bugs."

"Just because Leanne asked about bugs, don't get thinking I'm breaking in." Matt checked that the gear stick was in first. The Mini tended to roll back rather easily when parked facing uphill, even on a gentle slope like this. "I think we should forget about the clinic."

"And forget about Leanne Corbin?"

Matt sighed. "I'll get some bugs sent over, but I'm not using them."

"We will see."

There were at least two cyber cafés in town, and no way of knowing which one Leanne had used. Not that it mattered, they were only after information on the Internet. Matt paid for half an hour online and typed *Russia* and *icon* into a search engine. The first site gave a series of full color pictures with details of famous icons ranging in height from a few inches to well over four feet. So Leanne was right. They continued their search, reading the details from each hit.

Matt sat back and rested his fingers. "There doesn't seem to have been much love lost between Catholics and Orthodox Christians over their icons."

"All icons look the same to me," said Zoé.

"And me." Matt tapped the screen. "According to this, a couple of hundred years ago an Orthodox Christian caught with a Catholic icon would have been in big trouble."

"They did not like each other, I think."

Matt leaned forward. "I'm not surprised. It says here that the Fourth Crusade took a left turn on its way to Jerusalem in 1204, smashed up Constantinople, and more or less put an end to the Byzantine Empire."

"*Pourquoi?*"

"The Catholics thought the Orthodox Christians were softies who read books and took baths."

"That is all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"There was also a big religious disagreement, I think."

"You're right. The Christians in the East wouldn't acknowledge the pope as the head of their Church. The Eastern and Western Church started to split in..." Matt checked the date again. "In the fourth century. They finally broke apart in the eleventh."

"Ah."

"What does that mean?"

"It means... it is sad. They should all be on the same side."

"Perhaps they are now."

"Ah," repeated Zoé shaking her head.

"Anyway," Matt continued to read, "the Byzantine artists fled north and developed a new style of icon painting in Russia."

"Even though they all look the same," repeated Zoé.

"They do to us. That's because we're not experts. Well, that's enough culture for me. No point in overloading my brain." Matt clicked on the *History* button, found his Internet search sites and deleted all entries, including the previous user's interest in edible fungi. "I'd feel happier if Leanne had taken the same precautions." He logged off and pushed his chair back noisily.

Zoé looked around the small café. Two young men shared a computer, but otherwise the place was empty.

They walked through to the Place des Papes, the vast square with the Papal Palace on one side, and stores and restaurants on the other.

"So now we know all about Russian icons," said Zoé.

"Enough to know that they're incredibly valuable. Let's hope Leanne Corbin tells us more about her worries when we meet again on Sunday."

Zoé pointed to the huge Palace. "I think it looks like concrete. Are you sure it is old?"

"You're a peasant," said Matt in disgust. "I've been reading the guidebook. The Palace des Papes was the center of the papacy in mediaeval times. The papacy moved out of the Vatican because Italy was too dangerous. When it was safe to return, the pope here didn't want to go back. So the Church had to elect another one in Rome. They ended up with two popes at the same time for the next hundred years. Popes and anti-popes. It got very confusing."

"Me, I am confused also."

Matt shrugged. "It's hard to believe they tortured people in that place."

"Yes, that I think is what I am afraid of. Forget it, Matt. Please get in touch with Ken and ask what he has found about K7."

"What makes you think he's going to come up with anything sensible? You say Ken's always jumping to the wrong conclusions."

Zoé laughed. "Like when my highlights came out all blond by mistake?"

"And then Ken saw us out together and refused to speak to me for a couple of days. He thought I was seeing another woman on the side." He took hold of Zoé's arm as they stood in the doorway of a souvenir store and let a group of elderly tourists go past. "Ken's very prim and proper in a way, although you wouldn't think it to hear him talking. He was embarrassed by my old Triumph sports car when I started working for him. He thought the long bonnet was a phallic symbol."

Zoé laughed and hit Matt on the back. "You are serious? *Un symbole phallique?*"

Matt realized that several of the old people were now looking at Zoé in amusement. "He may not pay me much, but Ken's looked after me since I left the police."

"He reminds me of my Uncle René. But I do not like it when Ken gives you all the worst jobs."

Matt looked at his watch. "He'll still be at the office. He always stays late when I'm away."

"It is probably more peaceful when you are not there."

Matt shook his head. "He probably can't cope without me. There's a phone box." He pushed the folding doors open, inserted his French phone card and dialed Habgood Securities.

Ken answered immediately. "I've been waiting for you to ring, kiddo. I've found the newspaper and made a photocopy of the article you want. K7 are an extremely wealthy fraternity."

"Like your Freemasons?"

There was a pause. "*My* Freemasons? I can't comment there."

Matt signaled to Zoé to come inside the cubicle. He pointed to her purse and asked for a pen, but she shook her head as she rummaged through the contents.

"*Mon stylo* is in the car, Matt."

Ken's voice interrupted the conversation. "It's a couple of A4 pages."

"Can you fax it to the bar we used at the beginning of the week? Their number should be on the top of the fax I sent you. Got it? You'll need to add the International code for France."

Zoé squeezed his arm. "*Les micros*," she whispered urgently.

Matt nodded. "You still there, Ken? I'm going to give you our holiday address. I'd like a few tricks sent over. I think Zoé's becoming hooked on our trade." He smiled reassuringly at Zoé. "A telephone probe and a couple of low power transmitters. Nothing too expensive. Zoé wants to see them in action."

"You're up to something, kiddo." Ken's voice rose in pitch. "You're not going to use them at the clinic?"

Matt winked at Zoé. "Would it help if I said I'm not going to do it, I'm only messing around?"

"As the young man said to the fair maiden. I wish I could believe you. Look, Matt, K7 are big, and you're always rushing into trouble. Wait till you see what's on the fax. I suggest you get round there now and take the pages from the machine yourself."

Matt pulled a face. "You're over-reacting, Ken, but Zoé's good at bribing waiters."

"I'm switching my fax identity off. I don't want anything traced back here. Mustn't upset the apple cart. I might be invited to join K7 one day. And watch where you leave those bugs. If you're messing with the big boys you could be playing with fire."

"It's *my* holiday, Ken."

"By the way, I've had your bill for the rear window of my BMW."

"I expect it cost more than your car's worth. Stick it on the fax too." Matt put the phone down and retrieved his *télécarte* from the slot. "Good old Ken Habgood."

"What did he say?"

"He wants me to pay for his rear window. But I think it's only his idea of a joke."

"No, he was warning you about something."

"He was just being silly. I expect he's upset because K7 haven't invited him to join."

"You said you are only messing around."

"Look, I thought I'd made it clear that I'm *not* breaking into the clinic. There's a fax coming through to the bar, and Ken seems to think it contains things K7 would kill for. You can entertain your waiter friend again. Ken says I have to stand by the machine to snatch the pages the moment they drop out."

Zoé gave him a hug, pecking his cheek with a kiss. "Entertain my waiter? Now that is an offer impossible to refuse. You PIs lead a life so exciting. I did not realize espionage could be so much fun."

## Chapter 14

### The Vatican

THE TWO cardinals stopped to talk on the corner below Archbishop Valdieri's apartments, across the cobbles from the Sistine Chapel. Pietro Uffizi realized Carlo Presti was holding something behind his back, but Presti's flowing black cassock trimmed with crimson protected it from his curious gaze. The suspicious stance of his colleague reminded Uffizi of a guilty schoolboy.

"I hear the Holy Father is very poorly today," Pietro Uffizi said as they stood in the warm light of the evening sun. At this time of the day the sun was uncommonly pleasant. "They say his condition is worsening."

Carlo Presti shrugged his broad shoulders. "I fear you are correct, Pietro. The Holy Father did not lead the prayers this morning. Perhaps it is time for the Church to make a statement on the Pontiff's health."

Uffizi moved slightly to his left, hoping to see what was concealed behind the pompous Presti's back. "The Sisters of Maria Bambina are whispering about his fitness for current duties."

"We are all concerned, Brother Pietro." The hands came from behind the black cassock in a gesture of despair, divulging a cheap camera of gaudy green plastic. The figure in black paused for a moment, then continued with his observations as though his hands were empty. "You know he is unwilling to go into hospital. He fears adverse speculation in the press."

Cardinal Uffizi found his eyes transfixed by the trashy toy. "Are you taking up photography, Brother Carlo?"

The eminent figure now tried to hide his embarrassment. "For my nephew. I promised to send him pictures of the Vatican where his uncle works. You may peek through the viewfinder. I bought just now it in the Via della Reconcillioni."

Pietro Uffizi raised the fluorescent green camera to his eye and aimed it at the sky, careful that his crimson skullcap should not be displaced. A slightly blurred picture of the front of Saint Peter's Basilica filled the viewfinder, tinted to an unnaturally deep orange.

"Push the top," said Presti, reaching forward.

Uffizi pressed the small lever and the picture changed. "Yes, I see the interior of the Basilica. It is exceedingly clever. Perhaps I will get one for each of my nieces."

Presti guffawed. "Can you afford the expense? You have twenty nieces, I believe."

Ufizzi smiled. "Twenty-one. It was twenty *last* week."

Cardinal Presti lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "They say you must be careful where you buy such things, Brother Pietro." He retrieved the camera from Ufizzi. "There are stalls in the vicinity that sell salacious photographs."

Pietro Ufizzi attempted to look at his colleague in disdain, but his memory of their schooldays was too good to sustain the pretence. "Like we traded with each other at the convent school?" And he began to laugh. Presti joined in, slapping his brother cardinal on the back. "You remember then?"

The two members of the Catholic hierarchy began to laugh loudly.

\* \* \* \* \*

FROM THE TALL window behind the brown shutters of his apartment, Archbishop Valdieri looked down on the two cardinals giggling like a couple of silly girls. He sighed and shook his head. Clerics had never behaved like this in New York. Novices perhaps, but not senior churchmen.

Laughter was a sorry sound with the Holy Father suffering so severely. The pains were increasing and the diagnosis looked grim. The Holy Father was resting this evening, lying in a darkened room while two of his cardinals stood outside laughing. Regrettably the clergy had not been fully briefed, which perhaps made a limited excuse for this appalling display of merriment.

Stephen Valdieri reflected on his work with the Vatican Security Services. Promotion had come quickly after his move from the States, but not through finding the Smolensk icons. They were as lost as ever, but always on his mind. One day... Yes, one day. Every year he watched his face become increasingly lined from the responsibilities of his work. But his heavy lips would sometimes break into a singular smile, intended to alarm the guilty but comfort the innocent.

He returned to the writing table to read the batch of letters between Dr. Kappa in Avignon and Cardinal Delgado of the Vatican Medical Assembly. His mind had lost none of its agility, even though he was now in his early sixties. He quickly assessed the implications as he ran his eyes over the words highlighted by Delgado in yellow marker pen. *Confidentiality. Skilled diagnosis. Outstanding operating room facilities. Impressive recovery rate. After-care of an unparalleled proficiency. A guarantee of total privacy.*

An assortment of Vatican staff had visited Avignon over the past two weeks, and the clinic had come out smelling of roses—and miracles. Valdieri re-read the latest document. Professor Rossano and Dr. Bisenti, the Pope's personal physicians, had at last consented to the visit, albeit somewhat unwillingly. Nevertheless he still had not solved the key problem: how could the Vatican account for the Holy Father's absence from Rome without raising unwelcome rumors?

The two cardinals were still below, but the laughter had ceased. Perhaps the sense of foreboding was insidiously penetrating every corner of the Vatican. Valdieri placed the letters inside the folder on the writing table, his forehead a mass of deep wrinkles. The laughter of the two cardinals began again. But it was innocent laughter.

His face relaxed. He ambled over to the window and looked down on the two men staring into a bright green souvenir camera. He recalled an overused saying



from his convent schooldays: *Smile and the world smiles with you*. Problem? What problem? Suddenly he had the answer. The plan was so good that the press would suspect nothing. Valdieri felt like joining with the cardinals' laughter.

The Holy Father had once mentioned the need for an investigation into alleged visions by a sister at Tourvillon in Provence. Such visions required substantiation before official recognition could be given. Very well, there was a simple excuse for the journey. The Holy Father would go to the Convent of the Little Sisters to hear the story for himself. Such a visit was certainly unusual but not without precedent. The press would be informed and the reason for the itinerary made clear. But because of the great age of the alleged eye witness the press would not be permitted into the Convent. It would simply be a papal visit to validate a holy place—followed by a holiday in the peaceful countryside of Provence.

The press would surely respect the Holy Father's need for privacy while on vacation, but he would secretly enter the adjacent Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon to undergo tests. And even, God forbid that it should be necessary, major surgery.

The Successor to Saint Peter in Rome would receive the best earthly care without sending alarm bells ringing throughout the Christian Church. An announcement would be made that the Holy Father was going to France for confirmation of a young girl's visions. Our Lady of Tourvillon. Valdieri smiled. It sounded agreeable.

The Pope's life depended on this visit to Avignon, the one-time home of the anti-popes. The irony of the situation was not lost on him; he doubted it would be lost on the Pontiff. Valdieri rubbed his hands together slowly. He had been desperate to get to Tourvillon for an extended visit. As soon as he arrived he could start banging the woodwork and see what dropped out. He returned to the window. The courtyard was empty now. Idly he wondered about the third prediction. According to the girl's account the lady in the garden had talked about three messages. It was easy to see that two of them had already happened.

Third predictions in cases like this customarily took the form of a warning of a horrifying event about to overtake the faithful. If the Sister had fabricated the visions then the third message would be total nonsense. There could be no deception of course. If it transpired that the girl had been over-enthusiastic in 1934 there would be no official confirmation today. Even the smallest dishonesty in these matters was a betrayal of the Lord's trust.

Valdieri picked up the file of papers. Was there a third message, a terrible warning?

## **Chapter 15**

### **Avignon**

ZOÉ MOVED the pages from the fax machine to one side so the waiter could lower the first course of *bouillabaisse* onto her place mat. "It is probably a lot of fuss about nothing."

"There is a problem, madame?" The waiter paused.

"I was talking about the message," said Zoé.

"I hope it is clear enough to read." The waiter smiled and returned to the kitchen.

"He is after the generous tip from me again." Zoé drained her glass of white wine.

"Just give him money this time. *Merci*." Matt's bowl of *bouillabaisse* arrived. The waiter poured more of the Muscadet into Zoé's glass and left them alone.

"What do you make of the fax?" she asked.

"Looks like the Pope is sharpening his knife. It says he's ready to take on all sorts of Masonic and occult groups that intrude on the Catholic Church." Matt looked around the bar, an unnecessary precaution since all the customers were engrossed in their food. The man in the florid shirt was not here this evening. "There's a group called the Order of the Solar something or other." He licked his spoon and waved it at Zoé as he read. "Now they *do* sound scary. Everyone in it seems to be dropping dead. This is the bit we want. K7, Knights of the Holy Succession. Sounds like a grandiose title to me."

"What have they succeeded in? And keep your spoon down."

Matt took a final mouthful of croutons and pushed the remaining flakes of fish to one side. "Let's hope there's more flavor in the main course. I don't think the Knights have succeeded in anything—except getting rich. The succession bit means they succeeded from another group. Like the succession of the royal family."

"Yes, it is a word I know."

"There's something here about the original Knights of Saint John. Seems they weren't quite the gems of good behavior you thought they were."

Zoé picked up the wine bottle and read the label. "I believe my grandfather was a Freemason in Clermont-Ferrand." She replaced the bottle unsteadily on the table. "Did the Freemasons start from the Knights of Saint John?"

"The Knights Templar, according to this. I can't see why Ken was getting worked up. This cutting is nothing dramatic. It looks as though K7 is just a harmless, pseudo-religious group of men operating throughout Europe."

"They are not occult?"

Matt shrugged and tried to keep one step ahead of Zoé's questions with his reading. "Their main objective is the accumulation of wealth for members, with the belief that it will lead to a higher form of civilization."

"That, *mon ami*, sounds like my sort of club," observed Zoé as she sipped her wine. "Is there an application form for membership?"

Matt pushed his chair back slightly and let the first page fall into his lap. "There are seven Elder Knights, representing the major forces of power and wealth in civilization."

Zoé giggled. "Let me guess." The Muscadet on an empty stomach was obviously making her evening an adventure. "Private investigators, car repossessioners, writ servers, wire tappers, and..." She put her hand to her mouth and laughed loudly

enough to make a few heads turn in their direction. "I was going to say bug... Whoops!"

Matt continued reading the copy of the press cutting. "Listen to this. K7: seven Elder Knights representing the Church, royalty, medicine, government, academia, industry and the media."

"I bet you one thousand euros you could not learn that lot off by heart," said Zoé with a laugh. "See, medicine is included. I bet you one *million* euros they are all at it up at the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Wotsit."

Matt moved the nearly empty bottle of Muscadet out of reach. "Just keep your voice down." But there seemed no need for caution. No one was paying the slightest attention. "Just a few drops of wine and you go all tiddly. What would you be like with a whole bottle?"

Zoé leaned forwards over the table, knocking her empty glass sideways. Her eyes opened wide. "Try me, lover boy, just try me. I would be like a caged beast."

\* \* \* \* \*

ZOÉ WOKE the next morning with a headache. Matt pulled a kitchen chair into the small back yard to read the fax again, while listening to one of Zoé's Debussy piano études on their portable CD player. He'd not brought even the mildest of his Shostakovich recordings. Zoé had been in too bad a mood before leaving to risk it.

In two days they would be meeting Leanne Corbin again. There wasn't much in here to worry her with. He hit out at a wasp and wondered how Leanne was getting on. She'd probably forgotten all about her suspicions. There she'd be, up at the clinic in the hills, working hard and not bothering to keep an eye open for anything unusual. That was women for you.

The journalist who'd done the write-up for Ken's paper claimed that secret brotherhoods controlled the key professions. It was nothing but a rehash of standard press speculation. Their worst crime seemed to be providing jobs for the boys while all the members got rich.

"What does hedonistic mean, Zoé?"

Zoé stood in the doorway, her hair a dangling mess. "It is what you are, lover boy. Hell bent on pleasure, and hang the consequences. Can you turn the sound of the piano down, please? Look what you did to me last night. And where have you put the orange juice?"

Matt turned the volume down, but only slightly. He was getting to like Debussy. "If you're the after-effects of hedonism, I'll take care to tame my enjoyment of life. What a state you're in, Nurse Champanelle. You'd better go back to bed for the morning."

"I keep thinking about Ken 'Abgood."

"You're in no state to think about anything. I'm going down to the *pâtisserie* for a baguette."

Zoé held tightly to the doorframe. "Phone Ken from the square and remind him to send those bugs. Leanne will be asking for them on Sunday."

"You know me, always one to keep a woman happy."

"Whatever turns you on, Saint George."

"Well certainly you don't, not in that state." Matt grinned. Zoé seemed to know quite a few colloquial English expressions. She came across to the table and stood behind, holding him tightly.

"Go back indoors," he told her. "The neighbors might see you."

## Chapter 16

### The Vatican

ARCHBISHOP VALDIERI placed his heavy black-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his expansive nose and ran his hands through his silver hair. Then he straightened the large pectoral cross of plain wood that hung around his neck, made sure his purple skull cap was correctly in place, and knocked gently on the door of the room belonging to the Pope's Private Secretary.

"Umberto," he said apologetically, "I came as quickly as I could. I have drafted an urgent reply to Dr. Kappa." He placed a folder carefully on the antique desk. "Professor Rossano and his team assure me the Holy Father is capable of making the journey to France. The GIGN are on standby to provide essential safety measures. Do not panic, Umberto; the Holy Father will be in safe hands at the Clinic of the Little Sisters."

The Private Secretary, a small man with penetrating eyes, made a noise that conveyed disbelief. "A dark cloud hangs over Tourvillon, Stephen. The Holy Father cannot condone Masonic practices."

"Quite."

For all his years of service in the Vatican, Valdieri still felt inferior in the presence of Italians -- a foreign intruder with responsibilities in an empire staffed by Latins. An Italian surname and an American upbringing. He considered himself a mongrel. Many times his friends had assured him that such feelings of disapproval were imagined. Maybe he should have changed the spelling of his name to Stefano. "The Holy Father is happy in his own mind, Umberto."

"And this treatment is the unanimous opinion of his team of advisers?"

Stephen Valdieri shrugged his broad shoulders. "Umberto, my feelings as head of the Holy Father's security are already on the record. To use a medical term, the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon is benign."

"But Kappa. Jim Kappa is a Knight of the Holy Succession."

"We have no confirmation of that."

"An Elder Knight, one of the inner Seven perhaps. Such men would like to see the Holy Father dead." Umberto jumped to his feet, his high-pitched voice querulous.

Valdieri allowed his impatience to show. "Would a society intent on the creation of wealth seek to harm the Vicar of Christ? They would be *buffoni*, clowns, to bring down the wrath of the Church."

The Private Secretary seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "Stephen, the clinic at Tourvillon has presented us with a problem ever since the Vatican

advanced funds for the new building. The original agreement was for a division of the clinic's considerable income with the Church."

"I understand that there are legal problems with the agreement we made with the new owners."

"Precisely, Stephen. Ten years ago the administration changed hands and since then, as the sailor said, we have been left high and dry. A vast amount of money is being raised at Tourvillon, but only a small sum ever finds its way to Rome."

"A matter for the lawyers, Umberto."

Umberto sat down heavily. "But these things should not require legal giants to fight them out, Stephen. It is a matter of honor, of ethics, of basic Christian honesty."

"Their achievements in medicine are magnificent."

"Their morals are suspect."

"The Holy Father needs them, Umberto."

Umberto removed his glasses and polished the lenses. He was unquestionably used to awkward clerics. "The Holy Father will be advised of your report, Stephen. And he is no better this morning, I'm afraid."

"Yes, yes, I should have inquired after his health. Very remiss of me."

Umberto replaced his glasses. His penetrating eyes began to scour through some internal document. There was no more to be said on the subject.

Valdieri closed the massive wooden door softly as he left the papal apartment. How was it possible for one man to stand in the way of healing? No, he was being unfair on Umberto. It seemed that many men in the Vatican stood in the way of healing. Was he alone in finding Tourvillon the only hope? The Holy Father's life depended on the right decision.

## Chapter 17

### Avignon

"I REALIZE you're busy, Ken, but you know what Zoé is like once she gets an idea."

Ken was of the old school. If anyone mentioned a problem with a nagging woman, a great bond would immediately exist.

"I didn't realize you were serious last night, kiddo. You're always jumping in with your eyes shut."

"I'm not jumping in. It's some crackpot idea of Zoé's, so make sure they're decent bugs."

"I haven't got anything good that I can spare just now."

"That's not what you promised. Any fool with a trace can find the cheap ones."

"Is that so? Tell me, what's it all about?"

Matt lowered his voice. "Zoé has met this old nursing friend of hers. She thinks something suspicious is going on at... at the place where she works. It's just that,

well, there might be something in it." Matt wondered why he'd hesitated over using the name of the clinic. No one would be listening in to a public phone line.

"You can't bug a hospital."

"Maybe I won't need to. Maybe I'll just go through the motions."

"As the man said as he fell into the sewer. How about two micro transmitters and a phone probe? It's hellish busy here, kiddo."

"Sure, Ken." Ken's idea of being busy was having to make his own coffee.

"Three bugs to keep the little woman all content. That's a promise." Even Ken was starting to sound enthusiastic.

"We're meeting this nurse on Sunday. Any chance of sending the stuff direct to Marseilles?"

"By mail?"

"Air to Marseilles. Can you manage it today? We'll driving down to the coast tomorrow and can pick the package up at the same time."

He could hear Ken drawing in a sharp breath. "Think of customs and things. That sort of package will cause a panic at the postal service if the bugs come up on the x-ray. I can't afford the wrong sort of publicity. I'll use a twenty-four hour carrier to your holiday home. And you pay for them if they get nicked."

"That's a promise."

"You'll get them Monday."

"It's Friday today. That's not twenty-four hours."

"I'm not paying for weekend delivery, kiddo."

"Don't let me down, Ken, or Zoé will be on the warpath. You wouldn't like that."

Ken laughed quietly. "Twenty-four hours? That's the best I can do. You're still not messing with this K7? These bugs are not for *them* by any chance?"

"No problem, Ken. K7 are just a group looking after themselves—according to the article you faxed me."

"I'd take that with a pinch of salt. I'm a... I have this friend, a Freemason, and he reckons you can't trust K7."

"You're probably right." Matt was grateful for Ken's assistance. All this talk of bugging made him feel exhilarated. This could be a vacation to remember.

The *pâtisserie* was not far. The bread smelt great. He bought a baguette and walked slowly back to the house, picking at the crust. Zoé stood outside the door, her face whiter than it had been when he left.

"Alain Corbin is here." It was all she could say.

"Leanne's husband? What does he want?"

Zoé stared at the pavement.

"What is it, Zoé? You've got to tell me."

Then, "It is Leanne, Matt." Zoé's voice was a whisper. "Alain has come to tell us. She is dead."

## Chapter 18

### Avignon

"I'LL MAKE some coffee," said Zoé. "Or perhaps tea?"

"*Un café*, please, madame."

Alain Corbin spoke quite good English, but seemed relieved to discover that Zoé was French. As Matt shook hands he noticed a roughness on Alain's fingers. The grip was less strong than expected. But if Zoé had got the news right, it was little wonder this man had lost his energy.

"You were friends of Leanne?"

Matt spoke in French, not to show off, but to help Alain feel more at ease. "We met Leanne in Avignon last weekend. She worked with Zoé at the hospital in Lyon a few years ago."

Alain Corbin nodded in understanding. He was a short man, but strongly built. His hair grew in tight curls, with his sunburned face almost hidden by a huge moustache bursting from his top lip. "Leanne was excited at the thought of seeing you again on Sunday."

"Was her death an accident?" asked Matt.

"No, not an accident, monsieur."

"Call me Matt." Matt passed a white mug with a blue rim to the devastated stranger. It was painfully difficult to know what to say in circumstances like this.

Alain took the mug and placed it on the table. He shook his head slowly, lost in private grief. "I always thought nurses would know when they are sick."

"She seemed all right last Sunday," said Zoé. "Although she did mention headaches. Did you know about them?"

Matt would have started his coffee but he felt he should wait for Leanne's husband to begin to drink first. They were engaged in a cautious ritual and he was concerned not to offend Alain in any way; afraid of saying something ill-advised. He decided to keep quiet.

"You are right. Leanne started to have such terrible headaches."

"I am so sorry," said Zoé. "I told her to see the doctor."

"But she was getting better, so she said."

Matt drew a deep breath. He got the occasional headache. It was a scary thought, dying so quickly.

"Did Leanne die at home?" asked Zoé.

Inwardly Matt questioned the wisdom of Zoé's probing questions, but she was a nurse and should have developed some skills in talking to the bereaved.

"She died at the clinic. Ah, I have not explained."

Alain took his coffee at last, heavy trembling hands grasping the mug. Matt reached for his own.

"Tell us if you want to," said Zoé.

"Leanne came home early on Monday and was unable to stand up. She felt better on Tuesday and said she would go to work again. There were..." Alain Corbin shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "There were things she had to do, she said. She had made friends with the old nun they call Sister Angela. She wanted to talk to her."

Zoé nodded encouragingly as Alain continued. "Leanne brought some things home that evening. Yesterday she went to work again, but promised she would go to the staff clinic and see the duty doctor about her headaches. They phoned me

at the factory. She had been rushed into intensive care. I am a fitter, assembling agricultural machinery." He gestured with his hands, making a movement as though twisting a wrench. "I got there too late. Apparently her temperature rose during an emergency operation and she stopped breathing..." Alain Corbin came to a halt as his voice broke down. The end of his large moustache was wet with coffee and he dabbed at it with his sleeve.

"You have a brother, I believe," said Zoé. "Leanne said he is a priest."

"He lives here in Avignon. Yes, he is a good man and much help. I am fortunate to have such a brother. Before I forget, Leanne put some packages in the freezer. She was planning to give them to you on Sunday. Perhaps it is a little treat. She was always thoughtful."

Matt nodded. He would hide his surprise that Leanne had mentioned them at all, for she had only known Zoé years ago.

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Zoé. "You have your family to help you?"

"I have my family, but apart from my brother we have never been close. There are no children, of course. I expect Leanne told you. Always we have wanted children."

Matt kept his eyes on his coffee. This was hard going. "I am very sorry." It was all he could say.

"You must give us your address and phone number," said Zoé.

Ten minutes later Alain had gone. Matt stood outside in the narrow street watching the sad mechanic walk away in a daze. "I'd have gone with him if he'd let me. I hope he gets home all right."

"Home?" queried Zoé. "He does not have a home to go back to any more. Just a house."

Back in the kitchen the first thing Matt saw was the baguette, a sad reminder of a happy morning turned sour. There was no way he could face eating it now.

"It will do him good to be out walking." Zoé seemed in a reflective mood. She took out her long silver flute and began to play a lament that was new to Matt.

"What are you playing?"

"It is a piece by the Czech composer Smetana. He wrote it on the death of his daughter."

"Sounds sad."

"It is sad." After a few bars Zoé paused. "It makes you wonder, I think, how each of us would cope. A few weeks of headaches, and then your partner is dead."

"At least she got the best care, working at the clinic."

"It is suspicious I think." Zoé continued to play, the most mournful music Matt had ever heard. Maybe it was the atmosphere rather than the music.

"Suspicious?"

Zoé put the flute down and came over to put her bare arms around his shoulders. "Leanne did not seem ill when we met her in the bar."

Matt shook his head. "I said at the time that she sounded in a state. It makes sense now."

Zoé's eyes flashed in outrage. "What do you know about the medical conditions?"

"Let's not turn this into a row. If Leanne collapsed at work and one of the doctors put her into intensive care, he obviously thought there was a problem."



And if she died, there must have been something pretty wrong. I know you're a nurse, but give the surgeon some credit for trying to save her. You've got to admit Leanne's behavior was... unusual."

"It is your fault," Zoé said suddenly. "You should have listened to her. There were things Leanne wanted to tell us, but you told her to go off and make the investigations of her own."

Matt stood up and walked to the large glazed sink to rinse the mugs. "That's ridiculous." The tension was being broken by an angry exchange of words, as though a stupid argument would make things all right. "Leanne didn't know what she was saying; that's obvious now."

Zoé put the flute back in its case and snapped the lock shut. "Obvious is it! You are the PI. You are supposed to use your eyes—and you do not see the wrong things here?"

He shrugged.

"Matt Rider, you disappoint me. Do you not think it is possible that one of the doctors killed Leanne Corbin?"

"Murder?" Matt shook his head. "PIs don't investigate murder. The *gendarmes* would have to go in."

"I am not asking you to go *in*." Zoé came forward, grabbed hold of his arms and shook him angrily. "Leanne Corbin was a good nurse. For her sake *do* something."

He tried to pull himself free. "I could make inquiries."

Tears ran down Zoé's cheeks. "You could bug their phones."

Matt shook his head. "And what would that prove?"

Zoé crashed down in the armchair and burst into tears. "How should I know?" she shouted. "Do you not understand? I want to *help* the Corbins."

"Listen. Some crazy woman..." He raised his hands. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. Leanne was uptight. Uptight about something she thought was going on at the clinic."

"She trusted them with her life."

"You can't close down a hospital because they failed to fix someone's headache. It might have been a brain tumor."

"Me, I will get into the clinic and see Leanne's medical records. You, Matt, you will think how to get us both inside. Is it possible for you to get me in there?"

Matt guessed that Zoé was overwrought. "Forget it," he said gently. "If someone in that clinic killed Leanne, there's no way I'm going in."

"So why did we ask Ken to send the bugs?"

He left her in the kitchen and went into the back yard to think. Getting the bugs had been just a bit of fun. Now it had become deadly serious. Perhaps he could find a way to get in and check the clinic out, but it would be more risky than any job Ken had sent him on.

## Chapter 19

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

JIM KAPPA swiveled in his black leather chair to turn away from the window, away from the sight of sunlit fields running through the summer haze towards Avignon. He welcomed a few minutes' break in the middle of a hectic morning, but nothing could beat the stimulation of hands-on surgery.

A knock at the door signaled the arrival of Bill Clarkson.

"Sit down, Bill. I want to keep you updated." Kappa had no welcoming smile for the senior executive of the Medical Board. The man had ideas for expansion that had no place in this organization. "I have to be in the operating room in less than an hour, so I'll be brief."

"Sure, Jim." Clarkson was a tall American in his early forties, always formally dressed, with fine blond hair that came well below his ears.

Kappa nodded. "Professor Rossano has been on the phone this morning from the Vatican. The Pope's condition is getting more urgent by the hour. So the question is, are we ready?" He moved his chair to face the window again. The yellow umbrellas were already outside the distant pavement café, giving shelter from the heat of the day.

"We're ready." Clarkson sounded agitated. "You're getting us into this deep, Jim. Everyone here wants to know if you've thought about the future?"

"The future?"

"Can we cope with the demand for surgery when news of the Holy Father's healing leaks out?"

"I don't follow."

"The Board is already pressing you for a second clinic, Jim, and they want it in the States next time."

Kappa shook his head, annoyed at the constant questioning of his decisions. "Our patients see this as a consecrated site and it gives them something to cling on to. I'm a great believer, Bill."

Clarkson looked surprised. "You, Jim? A believer?"

Kappa forced a smile. "Sure -- a belief in the patient's willpower when it comes to recovery. A determination to live, and faith that recovery will be absolute. It's a good philosophy."

Clarkson dutifully returned the smile. "Let the Board check out a few sites in the States. The majority of our patients wouldn't need to travel so far."

"Perhaps the travel is what they like." Kappa found his eyes returning to the view. "No gain without pain; that sort of thing."

Clarkson walked over to share the scenery. "The surgeon's knife, Jim. That's all they're looking for, not some mysterious healing force on a sacred site near Avignon."

"Okay," challenged Kappa as he swung his chair back to face the room, "Let me give you an example. Take Steve Michener. He comes here all the way from LA, firmly convinced we can cure him of his intercranial neoplasm—his brain tumor as he calls it. And what happens? He has immediate surgery and a couple of days later he's on the way to full use of all his faculties. He was sitting up in bed this morning, actually reading a magazine."

Bill Clarkson lowered his eyes. "It didn't happen with the nurse."

"You mean Nurse Corbin?" Kappa looked at his watch. "I've asked Mario to conduct an autopsy. It will almost certainly turn out to be a viral infection picked up in town. Perhaps we work our nursing staff too hard on the night shift. Look into the rôtas, Bill."

"We're trying to keep the death hushed up. Wouldn't do to worry the likes of Mr. Michener."

"Michener's different, Bill. As soon as he got concerned about his headaches he had the good fortune to go for a medical examination."

"That man can afford to buy peace of mind with a craniotomy."

"Michener came here because our man in Los Angeles pointed him in our direction. He's getting better because he had confidence in something. Probably in our skills, but also in our reputation. Like I said, it all comes down to faith."

Clarkson was not giving up. "And if we opened in LA he'd be a vegetable?"

Kappa detected the sarcasm in the senior executive's voice and decided to speak sharply. "He'd be a lot less happy. Michener has money and he's pleading to use it. That's how it works when you want healing badly enough."

"So no more clinics?"

"My role as senior surgeon is to exercise my skill in the improvement of human life. Your role in the Medical Board is to give these skills enough publicity to attract the rich—to Avignon. That way our patients get better, and we prosper."

Bill Clarkson flicked through some papers in his hand. "We're in touch with Nurse Corbin's husband, of course. Monsieur Corbin is managing as well as can be expected."

Kappa looked startled. "What do you mean, in touch?"

"Mario is down at the house now. He's gone to tell the husband he's welcome to visit us at any time."

Kappa breathed in sharply. "I can't possibly agree to that."

"The husband will have to come up here anyway, to collect his wife's personal belongings."

"I'll have them sent down."

"It's like you said, Jim, this is a place of healing. Let Monsieur Corbin meet the Sisters while he's here. They'll help him come to terms with his grief."

Kappa frowned uneasily. "Is that really necessary?"

"Healing, Jim."

Kappa closed his eyes. "Just as long as you know what you're doing, Bill."

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him."

"Take care, Bill. Imagine what it would be like running clinics all over the world. The ship would sink and we'd all go down with her. You don't need me to spell it out. This is a family show and we're going to keep it that way. And who's complaining? Is there anyone on the staff who's badly paid?"

Clarkson shook his head.

"Like hell there isn't." Kappa pointed a finger at Clarkson. "The Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon is too good to spoil. It's a holy hill in a religious area—and we offer healing bordering on the miraculous. There's something in Sister Angela's visions all right."

"There is?"

Kappa laughed loudly. "Sure there is, Bill—a sack full of gold."

The phone rang and Kappa picked it up. Five minutes later he turned to Bill Clarkson. "That was Archbishop Valdieri, the Pope's personal security chief. He's flying up from Rome this afternoon. The Pope will be here Sunday."

Clarkson rubbed his hands together. "Somehow I just couldn't believe it would happen. Not with the Vatican investigation."

Kappa took a deep breath. "The Archbishop will be at Marseilles airport before three, so make sure you're on the helicopter to meet him. He wants a tour of our site as soon as he arrives."

"A full tour?"

"I hardly think so."

## Chapter 20

### The Vatican

ARCHBISHOP VALDIERI dropped his tan leather suitcase into the trunk of the limousine and smiled at the driver's protests.

"Even the clergy must take the part of hired hands," he said quietly. "We are all called to be the servants of Christ."

Convinced that the driver had said, not sufficiently discreetly to avoid detection, "This must be a first," the Archbishop opened the rear door of the Mercedes but wisely let the chauffeur close it once he was in. The air conditioning brought immediate relief.

"There is plenty of time to get to Fiumicino." Valdieri spoke with a lightness, determined to enjoy his visit to Avignon.

"The traffic is bad out to the airport, Your Excellency." Obviously not wishing to risk being late, the driver set a scorching pace as they joined the long straight of the Viale Angelico.

Before settling down, Valdieri straightened his black cassock with its purple edging, careful not to let it become creased around the back. He had chosen to wear his full archbishop's clothing. It was the best way to get action in Avignon.

It was never too late to keep looking for problems. A terrorist could have left a bomb in the clinic—perhaps several weeks ago, while posing as a patient—and it would be a simple matter for someone to transmit a radio signal to detonate the device at the appropriate time.

He felt some of the lightness fall away. There was no such thing as a free breakfast, as the English archdeacon often said. And there was no such thing as a free trip to Provence. He was accountable for the life of the Holy Father. It was just as well the French GIGN were taking control of the site.

"Is it true the Holy Father is unwell?" The chauffeur turned in his seat, oblivious to the weaving traffic in front.

"There are many absurd stories going around."

"I know there are stories, Your Excellency, but can you confirm them?"

Valdieri shook his head. "We mustn't listen to rumors."

"If they would only say." The driver turned forward and shouted something most unchristian out of the window at a motorcyclist who had clipped his mirror.

"There's always a right time to make announcements." Valdieri smiled to himself and hoped the chauffeur wouldn't take it as a criticism of his verbal exchange with the rider of the motorcycle who was still alongside.

"Like, when the Holy Father is dead?"

"Keep your eyes on the road." He secretly awarded his driver full marks for apt analysis. That was exactly when the announcement would be made. The Vatican always found it hard to make intelligent announcements on a pope's well-being. Or lack of well-being.

From the briefcase on his lap Valdieri produced a glossy brochure for the clinic at Tourvillon. The account of the girl's pre-war experiences intrigued him. There had of course been many such recorded appearances over the centuries. Some of them received official recognition, but often the local community failed to grasp the true purpose of the vision. It was all rather sad.

"Fiumicino in ten minutes, Your Excellency."

"Take your time." Valdieri was aware that his voice lacked any conviction that his instruction would be obeyed. They were on a wide, new road in flat countryside. He would eat on the plane. The papal executive jet was ready to whisk him to Marseilles, where the clinic had promised a helicopter to fly him directly to Tourvillon. Tourvillon, the home of Dr. Kappa's world-famous clinic.

Surgery for the Holy Father.

His stomach felt as though it had shrunk. He had pushed for Tourvillon, and now the future of the Vicar of Christ was in his hands.

## Chapter 21

### Avignon

THE BAGUETTE stayed on the side, uneaten, for the whole morning. It was lunchtime before Matt picked it up and began to tear half-heartedly at one end.

"It's not as though we even knew her properly." The crust had become unpleasantly chewy. "You won't like it, Zoë. We could crisp it up in the oven, or I'll get another one."

"We will stay here. Perhaps Alain will want to come again."

"Why don't we go and see him? He said Leanne had left something for us in the freezer."

"Matt, I do not wish to have any food from Leanne."

"That's a bit unkind."

"There you go, Matt. You are so like Ken: always you jump to the conclusions. I am thinking it would be too sad to eat the food of Leanne."

"We don't have to eat it. Alain wouldn't know. But we ought to get it from him."

"We have let the death of Leanne spoil our holiday."

"That's the way it goes." Matt shrugged. "There was something about Leanne that I liked. Lion Woman. I wish we'd asked her and Alain round for a meal. You might have been able to persuade her to see a doctor earlier."

"I do not think so. Nurses and doctors do not seek medical help. We will go and see Alain if you like, but we will not stay if his family is there."

"They won't be. You heard what Alain said. He only talks to his brother."

"He was depressed."

"Hardly surprising, with his wife dead. You were good, Zoé. You know the sort of things to say. I'll leave it to you. I get too embarrassed to say much."

Zoé gave him a long hug and he could feel her hot body against his chest. With her arms still round him, she said, "We will drive. The *pâtisserie*, it will be closed for lunch, but we can buy another baguette on the way back."

When they arrived at the small house, Alain opened the door slowly and stood well back inside the cool hallway. He appeared to be in a daze.

"My brother has just gone," he said. "I am sorry you missed him. He has fixed the funeral for next Thursday. I am glad that he will take the mass."

"We'll still be in Avignon," said Matt. "So we can come."

Alain stared at the wall. "A surgeon from the clinic was waiting for me here when I got back. He said it was a natural death, not a tumor. A viral infection of the brain that caused a rupture of the blood cells. Perhaps it is similar to meningitis."

A pair of candles, short and sitting in a pool of wax, burned unsteadily on each side of the closed coffin in the darkened front room. The small stone-built house had all the outside shutters closed, and Matt quickly became aware of the great sadness inside. One candle was burning down faster than the other as though symbolizing death, with Leanne's death coming first.

"The surgeon said I can go up to the clinic to get Leanne's things." Alain spoke quietly as though afraid to trust his voice to remain steady.

"Tell them to send everything down," said Matt. "Or we could get them for you."

Alain Corbin shook his head. "No, I want to talk to Reverend Mother and Sister Angela. Perhaps Leanne gave them a message for me before she died."

"Do it," advised Zoé. "I am glad you can talk about Leanne. It is good."

Alain nodded, but his eyes were watching the flickering yellow flames of the candles. "My brother said the same thing. The surgeon who called was Italian. He spoke a little French, but not very well, so we spoke in English. But his English was sometimes difficult to understand. His name is Dr. Bernetti. Leanne mentioned him a few times. He said there is to be no formal inquest."

"Did Dr. Bernetti tell you anything else?" asked Zoé.

Alain looked surprised. "He said Dr. Kappa was called by the duty doctor when Leanne reported sick. Dr. Kappa rushed her to intensive care, but he was unable to save her."

"So why did Bernetti come here?" asked Matt.

"He wanted to know if Leanne had brought home any property belonging to the clinic."

"A strange question," said Matt, remembering the envelope Leanne said she'd found in the corridor. More likely she'd found it in someone's room and been tempted to look, but this was not the time to upset Alain.

"He was just doing his job." Alain Corbin collected two more candles from the sideboard. "I do not want them to burn out."

"Would you like a lift to Tourvillon?" asked Matt. "You may not want to drive."

"I am not going until tomorrow morning, but I do not have a car at the moment. Yes, that is very kind of you. I did not know what to say to Dr. Bernetti. You see, there were some papers in Leanne's bag. Some of them were in Russian. And there were six CDs."

Matt and Zoé waited.

Alain seemed lost in a private world of grief. "I have destroyed the papers. I did not want Leanne to be in trouble for bringing anything home. Perhaps they were confidential records. I told Dr. Bernetti there was nothing here. What else could I say?"

Matt caught Alain's eye as he looked up from the coffin. This stocky man with the large moustache had been a husband yesterday. Today he was a widower.

"I will give you the CDs. I do not know why Leanne brought them home. She would not steal. And her present for you is in the freezer."

"It was very kind of Leanne," said Zoé.

Alain nodded. He led them to an old chest freezer in the outhouse, where he raised the rusting lid and stretched deep into the frosty interior to emerge holding a plastic lunch box with a snap-on lid. Zoé took it but kept the lid closed.

Matt felt it would be impolite to take it away unopened so he reached over and pulled back the lid. "It's meat," he said, "in plastic bags."

Zoé clasped her hands over her head and moaned aloud, making both men look at her in alarm. "Put the lid back on," she said urgently.

"What is it?" asked Matt.

"There is a problem?" Alain looked on anxiously.

"There has been a mix-up," said Zoé as she tried to hide the box behind her back. "Leanne must have brought the wrong container back from the hospital. Excuse us a moment, Alain," Zoe said. "I want to talk to Matt outside."

Matt followed her into the small back yard.

These are..." She spoke in English. "These are pathological specimens."

"I don't understand." Matt tried to retrieve the box to get a closer look.

Zoé held it firmly. "Pathological specimens. From the patients. For analysis at the lab."

"From the patients?" Matt felt sick. He went round behind Zoé and looked intently at the container. Through the cloudy plastic he could make out deep pink samples in little bags. "You mean those are bits of people? What the hell were they doing in Alain's freezer?"

## **Chapter 22**

### **Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon**

THE SUN blasted through the window of his room. Mario Bernetti adjusted the air-conditioning as he made time for a coffee and the enjoyment of his CD with the boys' choir. A helicopter had flown over earlier. Now, even with the window slightly open there was nothing to hear, apart from the occasional car horn rising in the heat from the village. Somehow Jim and his foolish Knights of the Holy Succession had to be stopped. They had brought the clinic unwelcome attention from the Vatican—and from Archbishop Stephen Valdieri in particular.

"Come in."

A slow turning of the brass handle followed the gentle knock on the door. Bernetti moved to cover some papers on his desk, not attempting to conceal his displeasure at the interruption.

"Mario, have you a few minutes?" It was Maxwell Wilcox, head of security. The thin American in the blazer spoke in English, the obligatory language at the clinic.

Bernetti waved him into the large room he used as a combined private office and living room. "It is my siesta. I rest now." He kept his attitude deliberately formal, though his annoyance at the interruption probably allowed his English to be basic at best.

"Jim Kappa wants me to advise everyone that Archbishop Valdieri is now on site."

Bernetti nodded. "I hear his helicopter, yes?"

"Yes, you did. The Archbishop is insisting on freedom to poke about wherever he wishes. And he expects to speak with every member of staff."

"Jim Kappa, he agree to this?"

"Sure. Why shouldn't he?"

"It surprise me, Maxwell." Bernetti stayed with his eyes on his desk, as though the discussion was already over.

"Jim reckons the Archbishop is only here to cover the Pope's visit. It sure would be comforting to know if that's all he's come for."

"Maybe you think of the Pope's commission of inquiry? All Masonic groups, they scared now. So why you come to warn me?"

Maxwell Wilcox stood close to the desk as though trying to see what was laid out under the hastily distributed sheets of plain paper. "We can never be sure of the true objectives behind a scrutiny like this."

"Let Jim worry about it."

"You have no worries, Mario?"

Bernetti looked up in surprise and met Wilcox's eyes for the first time. "I only belong to the Knights because Jim he tell me to join. But Jim can be sure I no tell the Pope about K7. That way I put myself out of work." He laughed uncertainly.

For a moment Wilcox seemed to be sharing a confidence. "Minimal membership? You're not alone in that, Mario. I sometimes wonder what I've got myself mixed up with here"

"But they pay good money. This clinic, it raises much money for everyone."

Maxwell shook his head. "Perhaps if Jim paid a bigger percentage to the Vatican he might be left alone."

Bernetti smiled briefly, trying to make it clear he was in no mood for humor or interruptions. "Okay, you go now, Maxwell. Please, no more talk about K7."



He could only wonder how such a weak man hoped to run a security service. What the clinic needed was a man with energy, *vigoria*. Archbishop Valdieri needed to be watched carefully. Was Wilcox smart enough to cope?

"And me, Maxwell, when do I talk with the Archbishop?"

"Your name is top of the list, Mario."

"You come here to warn me?" asked Bernetti, feigning surprise. "I have nothing to worry about."

"Perhaps not." Wilcox glanced at the picture on the wall above the desk. Something in the voice made Bernetti look at the security chief more closely. A man in his position, with access to all records, could know intimate details about every member of staff.

"Shame about the nurse dying," said Wilcox. "Not the best thing to happen with the Pope on his way. Fortunately the news hasn't got out to the patients."

"You go now, Maxwell. I want to drink my coffee and listen to my music."

Bernetti watched Maxwell Wilcox bow ever so slightly, but it was a pantomime act, a pretence of respect.

As soon as the security chief left, Bernetti locked the door and cleared the desk of all papers. Had Maxwell Wilcox come to pry, or were his hesitant words a well-meaning attempt to warn of something serious? Archbishop Valdieri was on the prowl. Bernetti felt thankful for his time in Rome at the Gemelli Hospital. It had taught one thing: encounters with senior Vatican staff were never as innocent as they seemed on the surface. He would need to be extra vigilant now.

The CD player remained silent. The boys' choir would not sing again that afternoon. Bernetti stared at the picture above his desk. Had Maxwell realized its significance?

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT RETURNED from the living room of their holiday home and watched Zoé lay the small plastic bags in a neat line on the kitchen table.

"I can't get Leanne's CDs to work on our player," he told her. "They're not sound recordings. They could be computer files, or images." He put them carefully on the table.

"Look closely at these," said Zoé.

Matt stared at the tissue samples from a safe distance. "They're revolting."

Zoé went to the earthenware sink where she washed her hands then dried them in a handful of paper towels. "For some reason Leanne brought these pathological samples back for us. First, we need to find out why."

Matt screwed up his face in disgust. "First? What else are you planning to do—fry them?"

"You are sick, Matt Rider. These are taken from patients."

"I know what they are. The question is, what are *we* doing with them?"

"Leanne wanted us to have them. And I wonder what is on the discs."

"I told you Leanne was... you know, she didn't realize what she was doing. She had this thing in her head. That's probably why she collapsed."

"Perhaps."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Zoé pointed to the table. "This bag is labeled a secondary duodenal tumor."

Matt shivered involuntarily. "It sounds disgusting. Why would a nurse have bags of the stuff at home? Did she forget to mail them?"

Zoé sighed. "You are no help at all. If you knew anything about hospital procedure you would know that specimens are either sent straight down to the lab, or they are chilled for urgent transport to an outside analyst."

"But these missed the system."

"No, they have already been analyzed. They are labeled up by the clinic's own pathology lab, so the diagnosis is definite."

"So why were they in the Corbins' freezer?"

"*Exactement!* And another thing: why did Leanne tell Alain they were for us?"

"Maybe she thought the clinic was screwing up the results."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because they're incompetent?" suggested Matt.

Zoé shook her head rapidly. "The Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon? They are the best, Matt. To use your expression, they do not *screw* anything up."

"They screwed it up for Leanne. I'm amazed she trusted Dr. Kappa anywhere near her. She should have gone to a local doctor in Avignon."

Zoé began to poke at one of the bags where the red of the contents was partly obscured by condensation. The specimens were already beginning to defrost. "I will put them back in the freezer until we have made up our minds."

"Could we get them analyzed for whatever the label says is supposed to be wrong?"

"It is possible." Zoé scooped the bags into the plastic container. "But what would it prove?"

He held the door of the small freezer. "Let's say the label is correct. If it is, then it proves they know what they're doing up there on the hill."

"I think that is one thing we can be sure of."

"But let's say the label's wrong. Let's say it's... well, you know some of the likely diseases. Let's say it's scarlet fever in that bag."

"You do not *cut* samples out for scarlet fever."

"I knew you'd start to show off, Florence Nightingale. I don't care what the disease is, but let's say they got the diagnosis totally and absolutely wrong."

"Then they would be *incompétent*."

"Right. And Leanne Corbin caught them out."

Zoé shut the door of the freezer firmly and went to wash her hands again. "You stick to your PI work, and me, I will stick to the nursing."

Matt wasn't going to give up. "Leanne took a great risk to bring those samples home. We ought to send those bags off somewhere for analysis."

"Where would we send them?"

"Your own hospital?"

"They would never do it for me."

"Don't you have a friend in the labs?"

"She does not do this sort of work for the public. What could I say to her?"

"Ken would know where to go."

"Ken? Oh yes, Ken he knows everything." Zoé didn't sound as though she meant it. "He is always telling you how wonderful he is, and how many important people he knows."

"Let's put him to the test." Matt decided he could ignore the gibe. "Ken might have a contact in the medical profession."

"Leanne, she was not mad you know."

"I'm beginning to think you're right. I just wish we'd taken the trouble to hear her out on Sunday."

Zoé opened the small freezer again. "We could drive down to Marseilles this afternoon, and put the samples on a plane to England."

"Marseilles is quite a way, Zoé."

"Poor Lion Woman. I thought you wanted to do something for her."

Matt looked at his watch. Zoé was taking the initiative on this one. "An hour or so to get there in the car? Okay, let's get exhibit one on the road."

*"Pièces à conviction une, deux, trois, quatre, cinq et six."*

"And the CDs," said Matt. "The labels are handwritten. I think it's Russian. Ken can let Mack the Hack see what's on them."

"We had better phone Ken first, to make sure he goes straight to the airport. We need to pack them with plenty of ice or they will quickly start to smell. Do you want anything to eat before we go?"

Six small plastic bags in a food container. Matt shook his head. "Not just now. It's not worth thinking about the possibilities of a mix-up."

## Chapter 23

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

STEPHEN VALDIERI felt pleasantly surprised by the openness of the nursing staff. The sight of his black cassock enabled him to talk openly with the medical assistants and nurses. He'd found the same openness last month on the initial visit. But with the senior staff it was different. Well aware of the Pope's opposition to Masonic and similar Lodges, they presented a brick wall to his every query.

Even so, the surgeons were expressing what appeared to be a genuine concern for the well-being of the Holy Father. It was a comforting impression. But long experience told him that beneath the surface there was chill water flowing in the darkness.

He stared from Bernetti's open window, with its outlook towards Avignon over yellow fields and tiny footpaths, and could almost be looking straight down on the rooftops of the village at the foot of the hill. "I believe you had friends in the Vatican when you were in Rome, Dr. Bernetti?" He spoke in Italian to make the man feel at ease. Maybe he could get the neurosurgeon to drop his guard.

Bernetti stayed at his desk. "When I was at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome I met many of your people. Please, call me Mario, Your Excellency. I heard you were American, but you speak perfect Italian."

Valdieri smiled. "It comes from a cosmopolitan upbringing, but I still think of America as my home. Tell me, Mario, would you call yourself a devout Catholic?"

He asked the question lightly, but it brought an immediate reaction. "I do not attend mass on a regular basis, but I have a baptismal certificate."

"Ah, that splendid piece of paper." Valdieri stayed at the window. He felt drawn into making a defense of his beliefs. "There will, I am sure, be many baptismal certificates presented at the gates of Heaven. Maybe Saint Peter will need a fleet of waste disposal trucks to keep the entrance clear."

Mario Bernetti tipped his head on one side. "Are you making a theological point, Your Excellency?"

Valdieri allowed himself a wry smile. "We will have to wait to see if a piece of paper is as effective as a personal faith."

Bernetti stayed at his desk, apparently studying a book on surgical techniques. "I will do everything necessary for the Holy Father."

"Professor Rossano at the Vatican will appreciate your skill when he arrives with the Holy Father."

Bernetti frowned. "Professor Rossano? I did not realize he would be coming. I think Jim Kappa will not be pleased." He looked up. "It is difficult to say this, Your Excellency, but please be careful of Jim Kappa."

Valdieri stood to go. *Dissenso*. Plainly there was friction between Bernetti and Kappa. "The Holy Father's condition is deteriorating rapidly, Mario."

"Does he arrive tomorrow?"

"Sunday. Professor Rossano and Dr. Bisenti will accompany the Holy Father, but you can be sure that crucial medical decisions will only be made by this clinic."

Bernetti began to fiddle nervously with a drawer on his desk. "I would like to carry out in-depth tests as soon as the Holy Father arrives."

"I'm sure Dr. Kappa has it all in hand. By the way." Valdieri turned away from the window in the manner of detectives in films, as though suddenly remembering a minor point of little importance. "Are you aware of activity by the Knights of the Holy Succession at this clinic?"

Bernetti kept his hands in the desk drawer. "I hear all sorts of things."

Valdieri sensed it might be profitable to keep this one going. He'd broken through the defiance at last. "You and I must go through a list of personal questions. Sooner rather than later."

Bernetti forced a laugh. "This sounds serious. Men from the Vatican in dark suits disturb me. Men from the Vatican in clerical robes of black and purple are positively alarming."

Valdieri pointed to the only picture on the wall above the desk. "Someone in your family?"

Bernetti nodded. "My nephew in Firenze. It was taken last year on his tenth birthday."

Valdieri picked up a small framed photograph from the desk. "Tell me about this." The picture showed Bernetti and Kappa in front of Bernetti's desk holding an award scroll, and looking pleased with themselves. "I was given a citation by the Medical Association of California for services to neurosurgery."

"Recently?" Valdieri studied the photograph closely, trying to make his question sound casual.

"Three months ago. The chairman flew here specially from LA."

Valdieri nodded. "Most revealing."

Bernetti looked at the picture on his desk, then up at the wall. He managed a half smile as he stood up. "Before you say anything more, Your Excellency, let me make you some coffee."

## Chapter 24

### Convent of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

WIDE ROWS of flowering lavender separated the Little Sisters from the hospital. After a light breakfast Valdieri spent fifteen minutes in private prayer before strolling across the gardens to the Convent, breathing deeply to experience the nostalgic perfume of his childhood.

The antiseptic smell of the clinic had proved rather overwhelming during the night, reminding him of a disagreeable hospital stay in Rome six years ago for the removal of a particularly vicious bunion.

The Mother Superior received him in the large hallway of the Convent. "Please, Your Excellency," she said with a strained smile, "do not judge Sister Angela too unsympathetically. Would you like to see her now?"

Valdieri looked in surprise at the Mother Superior. "Is that possible? I understood Dr. Kappa was somewhat reticent about granting permission."

"Permission indeed!" The woman in white bristled with indignation. "I would like to remind Dr. Kappa that the Convent and the Sisters are *my* responsibility. There is to be an unexpected visit by the Holy Father, just to see our little Convent, and Dr. Kappa talks about giving his *permission* for one of my Sisters to be seen? Why else would the Holy Father come to Tourvillon but to see the Sisters?"

Stephen Valdieri kept a careful distance between himself and the tall figure in the white habit. Obviously the elderly Sister Angela was not the only member of the Order currently in the dark. "Why else indeed?"

The Mother Superior raised a finger to her lips and spoke in a hushed tone. "There is much about Sister Angela's past we do not know. She was, I believe, a rather wild young girl. Some say she is a little simple."

"And is she?" The evaluation seemed to be given a little too quickly.

"It is what I was told when I first came here as Mother Superior."

"Then you have had many years to form an opinion of your own."

"I can believe she was once a willful child."

"I'm sure we were all willful children once." Glancing at the woman in white Valdieri let his smile evaporate. The incumbent of the Convent, superior both in name and attitude, had plainly never been a child. The woman with the dark skin must have somehow materialized as a formidable figure of authority. He had encountered many such women in his childhood and they still sent tremors through his stomach. "Speaking generally of course."

The barbed comment was ignored. "Please do not intimidate Sister Angela. She is not used to men."

The Archbishop shook his head as he looked guardedly at the large woman. It was odd how men could intimidate women, but no one thought that women could intimidate men. "Has she lived here all her life?"

"She was taken in by the Sisters in their mercy while still an infant. I believe she grew to be a stubborn child and received very little outward benefit from her schooling. Perhaps that is why she is not considered as able as the other Sisters." The Mother Superior paused, as though appreciating for the first time a possible justification for the Sister's lack of full integration into the religious community. Then she added as an afterthought, "I am sure you will like her."

"You lock her room?" Valdieri was surprised to see the large key in the door.

"A recent custom, Your Excellency. Dr. Kappa requested it. Sister Angela has been known to wander across to the clinic and talk to the patients in French, which of course they cannot understand. She is unable to speak English and Dr. Kappa is concerned that his patients might become anxious in her presence."

It was certainly time the custom lapsed. But he refrained from comment and made a mental note to take action later. "The Holy Father will meet Sister Angela in your cappella as soon as he has recovered from the journey."

"Thank you, Your Excellency."

The Mother Superior slowly opened the old but polished wooden door to the small room, to reveal sparse furniture and an elderly Sister in a white habit. "A guest to see you, Sister Angela."

The timid nun who looked to be well into her eighties was already on her feet. She bowed her head meekly.

"An important visitor is coming to see you next week," Valdieri explained, trying not to put on a patronizing voice, but realizing he had done so nonetheless.

"She doesn't know yet," said the Mother Superior quickly. "We thought it best."

Valdieri attempted a smile to give the frail Sister reassurance. "He will want to hear about your visions in the garden."

"It was a long time ago, Your Excellency." Sister Angela stood smartly to attention, her eyes solidly on him. "I was a silly, wanton girl when it happened."

"And who told you that you were silly and wanton?" Valdieri found it hard to conceal his annoyance at words that could never have been composed within this Sister's head.

"Reverend Mother did, Your Excellency."

The Mother Superior took a sharp breath. "She is confused, poor child."

The thought of this elderly Sister still being a child was unexpected. "I think, Reverend Mother, she means an earlier Mother Superior."

Sister Angela put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Reverend Mother, I was indeed remembering another. And the bishop. He was called in to speak with me. They both told me I was a wicked child to pretend such a thing."

Valdieri nodded slowly. It was easy to believe that *this* account was verbatim. "Now, Sister Angela, you must think back to the time in the garden most carefully. Sometimes children play games. Games of pretend."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

Valdieri could clearly hear the Mother Superior draw in another quick breath. If only he could be here alone with the old nun, it would be so much easier to find

out for sure what had really happened in 1934. How embarrassing it would be if the story collapsed at the first question from the Holy Father.

"You will answer the Archbishop's questions carefully, Sister."

"Yes, Reverend Mother."

It disturbed Valdieri to witness the overbearing pressure being applied to this frail Sister. "You moved to the Order in Rome? *Si?*"

The eyes came alive. "*Si.*"

"And you speak Italian well? *Con facilità?*" This switch to Italian was the way to get round the lack of privacy. "Let me hear you."

The tired eyes darted to the Mother Superior and back. "*In privato?*"

The problem was solved. Valdieri smiled, and continued in Italian. "It will be a secret, whatever you want to tell me about the visions in the garden."

"Like the confession, Your Excellency?"

Aware of the frustration shown by the French-speaking Mother Superior, Valdieri kept the smile on his lips. Everything said in Italian would be solely between this Sister and himself. "Yes, like the confession. Do you have anything you would like to confess?"

"I was walking in the garden. It was nearly time for tea and I was rather late." Sister Angela's eyes stared at the white wall as though glimpsing a rerun of something that was still vivid. Her Italian was perfect. "It is why I was late for tea, but no one believed me when I got back. Reverend Mother said it was just an excuse for my disobedience."

"But it wasn't?"

"No, Your Excellency, I swear to God that the Lady in blue spoke to me."

"She might have been one of the Sisters, or perhaps a stranger." Valdieri smiled reassuringly. "Could it have been someone you had not seen before?"

"Oh no, Your Excellency, she was standing in the air. And she smiled."

Perhaps none of the Sisters smiled. Perhaps that was how Sister Angela knew it was a holy vision. "And I believe she spoke to you."

"She wanted to give me three messages. The first time I saw her she said the enemies of France would destroy the Convent. That must have been true, because the German soldiers came a few years later. It was very frightening when they surrounded the buildings with their guns, shouting at us to open the doors." Still the Sister's eyes were fixed on the wall. "Many of my friends were killed. I ran away to live in the village for a year." She paused. "Your Excellency, I did become a willful and wicked girl when I lived in the village."

Valdieri watched the feeble figure hold out a pitifully thin hand. "Do you not think the Lord has forgiven you for that, Sister Angela?"

The smile was spontaneous. "Yes, I know the Lord has forgiven me because I know that Jesus died for me on the cross. And you must trust me when I say that the Lady really did talk to me in the garden."

"And there were three messages?"

The eyes came alight again. "The next day the Lady returned and said that this would be a place of healing for the sick. Isn't it wonderful the way the clinic was built? I know her words did not come true until many years later, but she spoke the truth you see. That is how I know she was really there."

"And the third message?"

"I am not sure." The Sister's eyes showed an unexpected consternation. "The Mother Superior would not allow me to return on the third night—or ever again. But now my prayers are for the safety of the Holy Father."

Valdieri felt his pulse quicken. "I think you know something of the third message. Is it a special secret?"

"The Lady never came back to explain it properly."

"Yet you know something?"

The Sister's eyes went to the Mother Superior and back again. "I overheard someone using the phone." Suddenly she began to sob. "It was the surgeon, Your Excellency. He is going to harm the Holy Father. Deep in my heart I know it was connected with the third message."

"And this was when you were still a child, before the war?"

"Oh no. It was a week ago, perhaps two. I am not certain."

"And the visions with the Lady?"

"They were a long time ago, Your Excellency. I am old now."

"Then you must tell me what you heard last week."

"You have a kind face, Your Excellency, but perhaps the Lady does not wish me to tell you what I heard. I will pray about it, and we will talk later."

Valdieri watched, wondering. Sister Angela had every reason to resent Dr. Kappa if he kept her locked away like this. Mixing the past with the present was a classic example of someone approaching dementia, but the Sister seemed aware of the passing of time. Even so, it would be difficult to draw any firm conclusion as to the reliability of the 1934 vision. Was it wise to let this confused old woman speak at length with the Holy Father?

Five minutes later the Mother Superior closed the door behind them, turning the key in the lock before accompanying him down the corridor.

"Well?" she asked. "In your experience, and giving the answer in French please, is it possible to know if a person is telling the truth?"

Valdieri ignored the caustic tone. "What do you think, Reverend Mother?"

"Who can say?"

"That Sister thinks she saw someone in the Convent garden, and whoever she saw, the event has had a profound effect on her. She also claims a more recent experience that has disturbed her very much, but somehow I doubt the two are related. Sister Angela is unclear, even in her own mind."

"I would like to know why there was no clear third message in nineteen thirty-four."

"The answer to that is only too obvious." Valdieri straightened his purple skullcap. "Unfortunately the Mother Superior refused to allow Sister Angela to return to the garden. No attendance, no proper message. Bluntly, Reverend Mother, your predecessor blew it."

"So we will never know?"

"Perhaps there is a way." The Mother Superior brought out the worst feelings in him. He felt like a mischievous boy again in his convent school, dared by unseen witnesses to avenge a million pupils.

"Your Excellency?"

"It occurs to me that the lady in the visions might be tempted to reappear again, if a very holy person were to stand long enough in the garden."



They emerged into the courtyard where the fragrance of the lavender again brought back strong memories of those school days.

He smiled. "Is there such a person in the Convent of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon today, Reverend Mother? Other than Sister Angela of course."

## Chapter 25

### Avignon

THE DOORBELL rang continuously when Matt and Zoé were still in bed, their small CD player turning out the harsh tones of an Ibert flute sonata. Matt lurched to the window to see the roof of a yellow delivery truck in the narrow street below. The small package needed a signature.

"This is what I call a fast service." He returned to the comfort of the large, creaking bed.

"What is it?"

"It's from Ken Habgood."

"My samples are back already?"

"Hardly. Hey, keep off, I'm trying to open it up."

"I thought you liked the warm hands. What is it?"

"The bugs."

Zoé picked up one of the small black boxes that were no bigger than a matchbox. She looked at Matt who had thrown his head back in laughter. "Something is funny?"

"Typical of Ken. Just look at his letter. These bugs are the cheapest you can get, but if I lose them he's going to stop my pay for two months."

"He is joking?"

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"Then he should give you more money and only stop your pay for one month. How do they work?"

"We need a radio—which he hasn't sent."

"Well, he certainly saved on the costs. Can we still use them?"

"Our car radio should be able to find them." Matt turned in surprise. "What do you mean, can we still use them? The job is terminated as far as I'm concerned. Finished. Over. Got it?"

"You wanted to help Leanne."

He jumped off the bed and pulled on his jeans. "Leanne's dead. We can't help her now. Alain won't want us tapping phones and planting bugs. Just forget about it, Zoé."

"But you said..."

"For one thing Leanne's death probably wasn't suspicious. And for another..."

"Yes?"

"I'm a private investigator, spelt P-R-I-V-A-T-E. I'm on holiday and I'm in another country. And that's only for starters. PIs can't hold an inquiry into a suspicious death."

"Alain would want to know who murdered Leanne."

"Will you stop it!" Zoé's persistence was becoming annoying. "You're pouting. I hate it when you pout. I'm going out to buy some croissants. If you're so keen to do something, make the coffee."

"So, who is Monsieur Grumpy this morning?"

Matt picked up one of the small black boxes. "We'd never use junk like this on proper surveillance work. I'm surprised Ken sent them."

"Could you listen from far away?"

"From a quarter of a mile—if you're lucky."

"A quarter of a mile is like a hundred kilometers. Please, let us do it. For the sake of my friend Leanne."

"I don't think you understand imperial measurements. A quarter of a mile is about 400 meters." Matt pulled on his sneakers. "And don't keep saying that about Leanne. You're still pouting. It doesn't suit you."

She threw the packaging at him. "So you are not going to help?"

"Help, girl? Just think about this sensibly. Suppose we find a way to get into the clinic, and manage to place these bugs on their phone and in their offices."

"I thought you knew how to do it."

"I don't even know how to get *inside*. We've only been as far as the gate and it's obvious they have good security. I've already told you, no one rushes into surveillance. But okay, supposing we could manage to get in."

"Yes?"

"And then we get caught."

"We do?"

"Let's say we do, yes. If Leanne was right and they're as guilty as hell, what would they do to us?"

"Tell me," said Zoé puckering her lips and making a move to entice him back into bed.

"They strap us down on the operating table and drill holes into our heads, right through into our brains."

"That is not a nice thing to say." Zoé sounded shocked.

"It's what you think they did to Leanne."

"No, it is not. Not exactly like that. Anyway, perhaps they are not guilty of anything."

"In that case they hand us over to the local police who lock us away for a few days. Either way we're not going to enjoy the rest of our holiday."

Zoé lay back on the bed, her top open. "Such a shame you got dressed, lover boy. If you want to enjoy your holiday ... Now who is it?"

The doorbell rang again, just the once this time. Matt opened the window and looked down into the street. "It's Alain. I'll go."

"Then be polite. I will come as soon as I am dressed. Make us all some coffee, Saint George."

Matt invited Alain in and they sat together, waiting for Zoé to appear. Matt picked up one of Zoé's magazines, rolled it tightly, and whacked a large fly out

through the back door. The open window had allowed several sizeable insects to invade the kitchen during the chilly night. Avignon was unpredictable for temperature, but the forecast said this would be the hottest day of the year.

Zoé appeared five minutes later, dressed and ready to meet the world, having managed to apply a generous dab of makeup before hurrying downstairs to meet their guest.

Leanne's husband explained that he wanted to take them up on their offer of a lift to the clinic to collect his wife's things. He sounded in a dispirited mood. Matt put an arm on his shoulder. It was a move that Alain would probably appreciate, and he felt better in himself for doing it.

Alain pulled himself free and waved his arms in a gesture of despair. "Leanne knew something she did not tell me. Whatever it was, I think it is why Dr. Kappa killed her."

"Then tell the police," said Matt.

"And would they believe me?"

Matt felt like saying no, of course they wouldn't. He noticed Zoé's critical glare. "I can keep an eye open for anything suspicious. I know how to look for something out of order." As he said it he realized just how condescending he sounded.

"My car is in for repair." Alain shook his head. "I could get a taxi but I cannot face the thought of going alone to speak with Reverend Mother. I am sorry."

"Of course we will drive you," said Zoé. She paused. "I have an idea."

Matt guessed that her hesitation was not as spontaneous as she wanted it to sound.

"I am just going upstairs." She ran into the hall.

Matt guessed what she had in mind. "No, Zoé!"

Her high heeled fashion shoes clattered up and then down the wooden staircase. "Just wait till you see what Matt sent for." Her voice sounded breathless from the sudden burst of energy. "These are..." She frowned as she searched in her mind for the French word. "Matt uses them to listen to people talking."

"Ah, *les micros*. I understand."

"Good. Well, Matt is going to hide *les micros* while we are at the clinic."

"No, Zoé, we only got them because..."

"Go on," insisted Zoé. "We only got them because...?"

Matt bit his lip. It was unfair of her to force him into the corner. "Because Leanne asked us to do something," he added.

Alain's tired face showed a spark of curiosity. "Leanne wanted you to put *les micros* in the clinic?"

Matt sighed. He'd lost the argument. If he'd been prepared to do it for Leanne, admittedly with a bit of arm-twisting by Zoé, he ought to do it for Alain. But these cheap toys weren't the right tools for the job. This could turn into the big one. "It's not like a domestic job. I can't just break in and leave these behind."

"You are not breaking in, Matt. Alain is going to get us through the gates—officially." Zoé looked at Alain encouragingly. "We will all help Matt hide them when we collect Leanne's belongings."

Matt groaned. "I know I usually rush into things, but not this one. A PI who jumps in without looking usually jumps into the deep end—thinking it's shallow."

"But Alain wants us to help."

Matt knew he'd not only lost the argument, he'd lost the battle. Alain Corbin was watching him closely, and at the same time Zoé was trying to deliver a withering look that dared him to chicken out. He picked up a small black box with miniature clips attached to two protruding wires. "How are we going to get this onto the phone lines?"

"You were telling me a few days ago," said Zoé.

"You can't have been listening. I said there was nowhere obvious to put a pickup on the hillside."

"Then clip it on the telephone line inside the building."

Somehow he was being caught up in Zoé's enthusiasm. He was always a sucker for a challenge. "I'll have a look round—just to see what we need. I'll contact Ken again and get something decent sent over. These bugs aren't good enough for a high security site."

Zoé sounded chirpy. "Bring *les micros* with you. We might get a chance to use them. All right? *D'accord?*"

Matt slipped the three bugs into the top pocket of his lightweight denim shirt. It wouldn't be all right. He knew that for a fact. "I've not even checked to see if they work." Not that it mattered. As soon as they were inside the clinic, Zoé would forget all about them.

## Chapter 26

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"THIS SITE *must* be shut to visitors from noon today, Dr. Kappa."

Archbishop Valdieri referred to a pad of notes on his lap as he spoke. Official recognition of a holy vision was still the reason the public were being given for the Holy Father's visit. His medical treatment would remain top secret.

"You've heard of GIGN no doubt." Valdieri deliberately raised his eyebrows as he made eye contact with Kappa. "Formally they're the *Groupement D'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*. Site security will be in the hands of France's top anti-terrorist unit."

"I thought perhaps the local police, or even the army..."

"Not if we want the Papal visit to remain hidden from the world." Valdieri shook his head vigorously. "Imagine the wagging tongues in the village if a circus of armed men was seen rushing around the place. I want your security staff to remain on site, but their presence is solely for cosmetic purposes."

The senior surgeon had papers of his own to refer to and kept his eyes down. "I've asked Maxwell Wilcox, our head of security, to join us. I must warn you, Your Excellency, he's expecting a key role."

Security was his number one priority and Valdieri had no qualms about stepping on sensitive toes. "Then he'll be disappointed."

Jim Kappa coughed awkwardly. "The news might be better coming from you."

"I'm sure he'll understand the need for a professional force."

"Do the GIGN know what they're doing?" Jim Kappa's voice expressed more than surprise. Mockery.

"Have you ever seen a GIGN member, Dr. Kappa?"

"Probably not."

"That's because they're invisible. Either I surround the grounds with crack troops and draw everyone's to the area—or I enlist invisible forces of the highest caliber. Thanks to the generosity of the President of France I have been able to choose the GIGN option. Just half a dozen of their men could keep this hillside safe against a determined terrorist attack." Valdieri paused, staring at Kappa. "There will be fifteen."

"The local police won't like it."

"The local police won't know."

Kappa scribbled something on his pad. "News sometimes gets out."

Valdieri had been looking for this opportunity. He put on his legendary smile that generally scared the guilty. "If the news gets out, Dr. Kappa, we will know where it came from—and where it went. In other words, it will have come from one important member here to a brother member in the French police."

Kappa started to rise from his black leather armchair but he slowly relaxed and swung it away to face the window. "I think I am starting to understand the real purpose of your visit, Your Excellency."

Valdieri tilted his head sideways, attempting to read the surgeon's expression, but the chair was too close to the window. "The purpose of my visit is to report to the Vatican that security at the Little Sisters of Tourvillon is one hundred percent tight. The Holy Father will not be coming until I am entirely satisfied. For some time now I have been collecting the names of members of a secret Masonic group."

"A legal group!" Kappa shifted his chair to face his accuser. "It's only *within* the Church that such groups are illegal. I am *not* within the Church."

"Semantics, Dr. Kappa." Valdieri put up a hand in a gesture of friendship. "Look at it this way. The Holy Father intends to stop anti-Christian teaching by secret societies on the fringe of the Church. Would you fault him in that?"

Kappa shrugged.

Valdieri smiled. "Rest assured that the Vatican has no jurisdiction over Masonic practices in the secular world. Abuses of power are for the civil courts."

"But only when there is sufficient evidence of corruption."

"Naturally. You must know as well as I do that I would not be able to pursue you, or any other member, through the courts."

"You're being remarkably candid." Kappa rubbed his hands together, probably in anxiety and certainly not in elation.

"Dr. Kappa, an inquiry into membership of lodges is not the primary reason for my visit. I make no accusations at present. However, if I thought that K7 or any similar group posed a threat to the Pope, you and I would not be talking right now. I would be at another clinic, making appropriate arrangements for the Holy Father to be treated there."

"An inferior clinic, Your Excellency."

"You are so right, Dr. Kappa. Inferior—but safer. I just want you to know where we both stand."

Kappa had his black leather chair facing the window again. "Your attitude makes it extremely difficult for me to work on the Pope's medical condition."

"If you want to be kept in the background..."

"No!" The chair was quickly swung to face the room. "As I told the Vatican committee last month, my skills are fully at the Holy Father's disposal. Perhaps if we..." Kappa broke off to answer his phone. "Yes, in about two minutes." He replaced the handset slowly. "Maxwell Wilcox is on his way."

"You were about to say something?"

"The Board hopes that the Vatican will view our personal connections here with understanding, Your Excellency, assuming we are successful in returning the Holy Father to full health. Might that not be so?"

"I cannot say."

"But it's possible?"

Valdieri knew he was being boxed in. "While the Holy Father lives he will continue to probe every secret society that involves the Church. He has made that absolutely clear."

Kappa shook his head. "I imagine that with the right medical treatment the Pope has many years of life ahead of him."

"We all pray that it will be so. After several weeks of agonizing within the Vatican, the decision to use Tourvillon was made by a small group of papal advisers. They acted on my recommendation. Your surgical techniques are unparalleled in Europe. Unparalleled in the world, I might say."

There was a soft knock at the door and Maxwell Wilcox entered before Kappa could respond to the flattery. Valdieri watched the man in the navy blazer glance briefly in his direction.

"I didn't realize the Archbishop was still with you, Jim. I hope I'm not too early."

Kappa beckoned Wilcox into the large armchair the other side of the window. Valdieri smiled wryly to himself. That chair would have suited him, and he could have kept an eye on Kappa's face each time the man looked out of the window. Now he knew why it had remained empty. These two men were devious, and at times like this probably very close. He was being ignored as Wilcox got into conversation with Dr. Kappa.

"Nurse Corbin's husband is calling this morning, Jim."

Kappa looked startled. "What the hell for?"

The head of security seemed surprised at the question. "He's coming to collect his wife's effects. And he wants to talk to the Mother Superior. Is that okay with you?"

Kappa nodded briefly. "As long as he's gone before midday. That's when the Archbishop is closing the location to all visitors."

Wilcox turned to Valdieri. "The hell he is! Nobody told me."

The man with the shiny gold buttons on his blazer annoyed Valdieri. "That is why I asked you to come here, Mr. Wilcox, so I could tell you."

Maxwell Wilcox pointed first at himself and then at Valdieri. "*You asked me to come, Archbishop?*"

Kappa was quick to pour water on the fire. "The Pope's security is now Archbishop Valdieri's responsibility, Maxwell."

Maxwell Wilcox seemed to be fighting down a rising anger. "Before we go any further, Jim, we need to establish exactly who's in charge of what."

Valdieri sighed inwardly. He wanted this man on his side but it sounded as though there was little chance of that happening. He tried to put things diplomatically. "There is no suggestion that your work here is anything but exemplary, Mr. Wilcox. You can blame me for the decision to use outside security forces, but it's the way we do things at the Vatican."

"There's never been any trouble on this site," Wilcox mumbled.

Valdieri smiled. "Then let us hope we can keep it that way." He turned to Kappa. "Tell me about the nurse who died earlier this week."

Kappa had his chair towards the window. "Nurse Corbin died of massive internal bleeding within the brain, caused by a virus she probably picked up in town. There was an existing weakness."

Valdieri noticed that Kappa's response sounded dismissive, as though a death amongst the staff was a trivial matter. "Not a common occurrence, I'm sure," he said.

Kappa got up and made his way to the drinks cabinet. "No, not a common occurrence, Your Excellency, but this clinic is not always able to bring off a miracle." He laughed anxiously. "Unfortunate timing though. Puts a dent in our track record." He shifted nervously on his feet. "If it's any consolation, the nurse's death was inevitable. The Holy Father has nothing to be concerned about."

## Chapter 27

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE GUARD left the security barrier down as he came forward. That was when he noticed Alain in the front passenger seat of the old Mini.

"Alain Corbin!" The expression of delight quickly changed to sorrow. "Alain, my friend, I am so sorry to hear about Leanne. These are your friends?" The guard nodded first to Matt, and then to Zoé who was in the small rear seat.

"Bonjour, Maurice." Alain sounded very down. "Yes, these are my friends. I have come to collect Leanne's things." He showed the letter from the Medical Board.

"They asked you to come up here at a time like this?" The guard shook his head before returning to the gatehouse for instructions.

A more senior man came out to read Alain's letter before going back inside to use the phone.

"That's Aldo," said Maurice the guard. "He's a pain. We're on a special alert today, so you may not be allowed in."

Matt could see what Maurice meant. The high steel gates beyond the barrier remained firmly closed and could not even be passed on foot.

"If they search us, they'll find the bugs," whispered Zoé.

"I said we shouldn't have brought them." Matt revved the engine to keep it running smoothly. "Just smile. Trust me."

Aldo returned from the phone. "Your two friends are to remain here," he snapped.

"They are not just friends," protested Alain. "They are helping me in my time of grief."

Matt looked at Alain. It must be a bleak task, coming to collect the clothes and personal effects of your dead wife. No wonder Alain needed them with him this morning.

Maurice was quick. "I could go with them, Aldo."

Aldo stared at the car. Matt knew from his manner that he was a tough security expert, assessing them closely. "Wait here." Aldo finished his appraisal and returned to the phone.

The conversation was long. Without a hint of a smile he marched back to the car. "Maurice, escort the three of them to Mr. Clarkson's office. I want them back through these gates in..." He studied his watch. "An hour at the most."

The barrier was raised but Matt had to wait for Aldo to walk ahead and open the steel paneled gates. Maurice told them to continue up the long zigzag drive as far as the main entrance. He would follow in the Moke.

Ahead lay the spacious hospital of the Little Sisters. Matt watched as a songbird rose high into the air like a guardian angel of the sick. There was no sign of Zoé's black kites, which meant that the songbird was safe for now.

Everything about the hospital said care and healing. This was not a place where inquisitive nurses died. Matt blipped the throttle and the small engine responded with a buzz, before settling to a slightly unsteady note. He shifted the gear lever into first and let the clutch in slowly.

\* \* \* \* \*

STEVE MICHENER stood at his window attracted by the sound of a bird singing. It echoed the optimism he felt. If there was a God above that blue sky he deserved a vote of confidence on a morning like this. He recalled the night he had lain in bed terrified by the disappearance of the pinpoints of starlight. It seemed to belong to a different lifetime.

France was a wonderful country, and the team at the clinic were so considerate. He'd bet money that the people would be just as friendly out there in the countryside—if only he could speak their language. Anyway, he was lucky to have a room with a view of farmsteads and villages spread across a landscape of brown fields.

He laughed to himself. When his consultant in Los Angeles had insisted on urgent treatment, the name of Avignon had come up. He'd heard of the place. *Sur le Pont d'Avignon*. On the Bridge of Avignon. A stupid rhyme from school. But there had been no *Pont* for him—just this distant view of the town.

*Keep back from the window*. He recalled Nurse Corbin's warning the day he'd arrived. Sometimes the *paparazzi* would hang around the village with their long lenses, hoping to snap someone famous. She'd even offered him a room round the back for added privacy.

Butt this was too good a scene to miss. He felt good about everything. And relieved.

"Mr. Michener, such a marvelous recovery."



Dr. Bernetti and Dr. Kappa stood in the doorway, both in dark suits. The smaller guy wore an expensive Italian design. He smiled, as much to himself as to them. These doctors really dressed the part. Staying here might cost the earth but they sure made a fuss of you. The world's top surgeons even came round in pairs.

The doctor in the Italian suit walked forward speaking his crazy English, his arms outstretched. "Mr. Michener, you able to stand by yourself already? I think you a good advertisement for our clinic."

Michener laughed as he staggered forward unsteadily to take the outstretched hands in his. "You folks are the best, I tell you. When I came here I thought I didn't have a snowball in hell's chance of walking out alive. And now look at me."

Dr. Bernetti beamed. "You a wonderful patient, Mr. Michener. You make up your mind to get better. *Forza di volontà*. Willpower. See, Dr. Kappa, the power of the mind, it is a wonderful healer."

Michener grinned, anxious to show off his perfect teeth. "You guys are too modest. You knew just where to put the knife. The headaches have gone, although ... leaning down just now to get my book from under the bed gave me one hell of a pain."

Dr. Bernetti sounded horrified. "Mr. Michener, you no do that! You most unwise. The blood supply to the brain, it go up when you go down. There are stitches, very delicate stitches inside your head."

Michener laughed. "Hey, can't you guys understand a joke? Would I do anything to damage myself? Like hell I would. I've a new movie coming up in the fall. I had to borrow against it to pay for your little excavation inside here." He patted the bandages on his head tenderly.

"A joke? Yes, of course, a joke." Dr. Kappa took Bernetti by the arm and they both laughed quietly. "We're only concerned for your welfare, Mr. Michener. Get back into bed for a rest."

"Sure, doc; just excuse me, that's all. It gets quiet here all alone. My girlfriend's flying over to see me early next week. Sex might be good for..." He held up his hands. "Hey, and that's a joke too."

Dr. Kappa was still laughing but perhaps not very heartily. "Humor can sometimes be as therapeutic as sex, Mr. Michener. If you want my opinion you'll stick to humor for the next four weeks. But I'm afraid we're postponing all visits for the next week, except by close family."

"You are?"

"Security. You must know how it is." Dr. Kappa shook his head. "All the patients here are VIPs—yourself included of course. But just once in a while we get someone so important they present an increased security risk."

"Like a head of state you mean?"

"Exactly, Mr. Michener. Like a head of state."

"Hey, that's great. Anyone famous?"

Dr. Kappa frowned slightly. "I guess all heads of state are famous, to their own people."

"Oh sure, sure." Steve Michener felt cautiously at the large bandage that fitted round his head like some sort of winter helmet. "Didn't mean to poke my nose in. Does a current girlfriend count as family?"

Dr. Kappa nodded. "If she's glamorous."

"Hey, Doc, don't start me off. It's lonely here in bed at night. You guys want me to go blind or something?"

Dr. Kappa had finished smiling. "When she arrives we'll just need you to confirm who she is. It would be easy for someone from the press to claim they were family."

"Sure, I'll do that for you." He ran his hands carefully over the bandage. "I feel like Tutankhamun. So when does this lot come off?"

Dr. Bernetti stepped forward, speaking again in his heavy-going English. "Your consultant in Los Angeles, he pleased with the records we send him. *Eccellente!* We give you another scan this morning. You rest in bed for the next hour, and then we wheel you down to radiology."

Bernetti clipped two large sheets of film onto the wall-mounted lightbox by the side of the bed and motioned to Kappa to join him.

Michener stared in fascination as the two doctors peered shoulder to shoulder at the blue, shadowy images. "And that's the inside of my head?" he asked in amazement.

"It certainly is, Mr. Michener." Dr. Kappa added something as he pointed at the light patch just above the top of the spine, but his words were muted and only the Italian heard them.

"Not bad news I hope." Michener tried to make the comment sound casual.

Dr. Kappa turned and smiled. "No, it's very good news indeed, Mr. Michener."

He began to relax now. "Would you guys look at that. See that tooth at the back? I chipped that one last month. I'm getting it capped," he explained proudly. "Like the front ones. Hey, and would you look there! You can see the front caps. It's weird. Just as well the public can't watch me on film like this!"

"Scans are very revealing." Again Kappa pointed out something to his colleague. Then, "Looking good, Mr. Michener."

"Can I sit up and read while I'm waiting for the next bundle of tests?"

Dr. Kappa unclipped the films from the light box. "No, Mr. Michener, I want you to lie down now."

He broke off as Bernetti said something quietly to him, and the two medical men spoke together in hushed tones with practiced ease.

"Dr. Bernetti thinks it would be advisable if we administered a sedative to help you relax. Something to make you feel sleepy for the rest of the morning. I'll get nurse to give you a small injection." He smiled reassuringly. "We'll see you later. Don't worry, Mr. Michener, everything is working out just fine."

## Chapter 28

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE INTERIOR of the main building seemed to be a clever combination of worldly luxury and spiritual austerity. Even to Matt's cynical eye the overall effect gave out a message that this clinic provided Healing with a capital "H."

"This is Mr. Clarkson's office," said Maurice the guard. "Mr. Clarkson is the chief of the Medical Board. I'll find him for you."

As soon as they were alone, Zoé grabbed Matt by the arm. "Quick, put one of the little bugs in here," she whispered urgently.

Matt shook his head, regretting that he had ever made contact with Ken. "Someone from security might be watching with a hidden camera. Anyway, we don't even know if the bugs work."

"Nonsense." Zoé reached across into his shirt pocket and pulled out a miniature black box. "I will pretend to look through my purse on the table and slip the bug behind the books. How do you turn it on?"

Matt breathed in deeply. The idea of planting a surveillance device in this room without planning was preposterous, but it held a powerful fascination. He had to make an immediate decision.

"There's a sliding switch on the side. But you're mad." There was only one way to stop Zoé messing things up. He pulled out the second bug. "Stay where you are. I'll use this one. I've already seen a good place."

An ornamental palm filled half the window, the plant looking much too large for its pot. Playing with his car keys Matt walked over to admire the view. As he passed the plant the keys dropped from his hand. He bent down to recover them.

"You'd better put these in your purse in case I lose them," he called out as he stood up, and tossed them to Zoé.

"You have done it!" she whispered. "Brilliant."

"Don't say any more." Then more loudly: "Come and see this view of Avignon. You can even pick out where we're staying. There, beyond the straight bit of road."

But Zoé stayed put, tapping the keys of the office computer. Matt went across, but his hopes of seeing something interesting were quickly dashed. The screen displayed a list of medical supplies.

"MedicStat," Zoé said.

"What's MedicStat?"

"It is a medical records program. It does everything, from keeping patient records to keeping an eye on hospital supplies. See, it has flagged up a shortage of paper swabs. They should not have left it running."

"Why's that?"

"It is very secure, but if you leave it on like this, a user unauthorized could get into the whole system."

"Could *you*?"

Zoé pressed a few keys and the screen graphics changed to a menu. "Not every terminal has access to everything. Patient records are private, but this is the office of a manager." She put a hand to her mouth. "I think it is the same as the MedicStat program they use at my hospital."

"Is that good?" asked Matt.

"I know how to get into the records of the patients. Someone has already used their password to log on. They are not, I think, very security conscious."

Matt felt the adrenaline flow. "Alain, stand by the door. Go on, Zoé, look for Leanne's name."

Zoé typed a short command and waited while the screen flashed. Another longer command, and then an alphabetical index appeared. "It is working," she said, a shaking excitement in her voice. "Corbin. Here it is. Leanne Corbin."

Alain was saying something. The door opened. Two men in dark suits came into the room.

"Good morning, I'm Dr. Kappa." The taller of the two spoke in English, and sounded American.

Matt walked forward with as much noise and commotion as possible, catching his foot in the large Indian rug in the center of the floor. The two men hurried forward to stop his fall, ignoring Zoé.

"I'm so sorry," Matt said. "We were waiting for Mr. Clarkson."

"Mr. Corbin?"

Alain came forward and shook hands. "I am Monsieur Corbin," he said in halting English.

"I'm Jim Kappa the senior surgeon, and this is my senior colleague here at the clinic: Dr. Mario Bernetti." Kappa paused, his eyes now on Zoé who was still at the computer. Matt could not divert attention from her any longer. "Zoé, come and meet Dr. Kappa."

Zoé stayed where she was, pointing at the monitor. "This is very clever."

Kappa hurried across. "I hope there's nothing confidential on there."

"Confidential?" Zoé sounded shocked at the thought. "Oh no, I am sure there is not. Some sort of medical equipment list. I am a nurse in England. I would love to know how to work one of these, but I always think computers are so frightening."

"A nurse?" Kappa looked at her closely before reading the screen. Matt noticed that once again it said that paper swabs were in short supply. "I'm afraid there's no work for you here at our clinic."

"I have come with Alain Corbin," Zoé explained. "Computers are all the nonsense to me." She smiled. "I do not think they will ever replace the nurse for a good bedside manner."

Matt felt life was worth living in spite of everything. Even Ken would be proud of Zoé's performance. A third man joined them and introduced himself as Bill Clarkson, the head of the Medical Board. He spoke to Alain in perfect French.

"Monsieur Corbin, you have my deepest sympathy for your tragic loss. Believe me, we are all grieving here at the clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon. Such a wonderful nurse, your wife -- so the surgeons and nursing staff tell me. You have come to collect her things, I believe?"

Matt watched Kappa and Bernetti closely. They no longer seemed concerned at finding Zoé at the computer. Kappa took Alain by the arm but spoke to Clarkson in English.

"Tell Mr. Corbin he must keep his visit brief. We've already packed the contents of his wife's locker. He'll find everything at the front desk." He turned to Matt, still speaking in English. "I'm afraid my French is very deficient. We're having a security exercise and all visitors must be off site by midday. Nothing special, just the usual fun and games that go with running a private hospital."

"We're not staying long," said Matt. "But Alain Corbin wants to see Sister Angela before we go."

Kappa pursed his lips. "I don't normally encourage visitors to the Convent, but on this occasion I'm making an exception."

Matt translated for Alain. Dr. Kappa seemed keen to protect Sister Angela from visitors.

Kappa nodded. "You must excuse me. I have an exploratory to attend to."

Clarkson led the way from the air-conditioned clinic into the summer heat of the gardens. He explained to Alain in faultless French that it was only a short walk across to the Convent building. As Matt left the room he glanced back. Kappa and Bernetti had gone to the computer and were now looking closely at the screen.

He took hold of Zoé's arm. "Did you get it back as it was?"

She nodded. "Almost."

"What does that mean?"

"There is a *previous screen* key. If they try it, it will take them back to Leanne's records, and they will know we have been looking." Zoé shrugged. "Leanne was not ill." She dropped behind with Matt, allowing the senior executive and Alain to lead the way along the stone path. She pointed to the lavender beds. "What a fantastic color. And the smell."

"You'd better explain," insisted Matt. "Was Leanne killed?"

Clarkson turned to look over his shoulder and Zoé hurried to catch up. "She did not have a ruptured blood vessel in the brain," she whispered. "One of those surgeons, he is lying. But I need longer with the computer."

"What about those CDs we sent to Ken? Would they work in there?"

Zoé shook her head. "It is part of the site network. It is not possible for anyone to put their own discs in. I will have another look later."

"You're not going back," said Matt tersely. "And *don't* try to bug the Convent."

"*Quelle bonne idée.*" Zoé was serious, he could tell.

Matt looked up at the forbidding gray stone walls and gray roof tiles of the Convent of the Little Sisters. The builders of the religious order had avoided the warm colored stone of the local houses. Surely this was not meant to represent the builder's idea of a peek at Heaven. He shook his head and glanced back at the palatial clinic. Life certainly had its contrasts.

Clarkson was talking to Alain as they came to the heavy wooden door. He looked at his watch before pulling the long cord to ring the brass bell. A Sister appeared at the metal grille, her face partially obscured by an enormous white wimple.

"Reverend Mother is expecting us," Clarkson announced loudly.

The nun adjusted her linen headdress to get a better look. Clarkson studied his watch again.

"I will open the door," she said after a brief deliberation.

They were allowed into the cool hallway but no further. The Mother Superior walked imposingly towards them from the living quarters and solemnly shook Alain's hand. Matt knew it would be difficult for someone in her position to throw her arms passionately around a young man, but a bit more tenderness would surely have been in order.

"You may go upstairs and see Sister Angela," she told Alain. "Nurse Leanne was a great comfort to her."

Matt nudged Zoé. "Did you notice? Over in the clinic it was Nurse Corbin; over here it's Nurse *Leanne*." Kappa's desire for formality obviously carried no weight this side of the heavy door that sealed the Sisters from the world.

"I hear the Convent was damaged in the war," said Matt in French as they reached the second floor. They were being led up a flight of narrow stone stairs in the semicircular tower on the side of the house.

The Mother Superior stopped and turned. The whole party halted. "Please do not discuss those events with Sister Angela. She was here when the Nazi troops shelled the Convent, and it still distresses her." They began to move upwards again. "The main building was destroyed. We are a much smaller number now."

The Mother Superior signaled to them to stop when they reached an old door of black oak, open just enough for Matt to glimpse the stark room inside. An elderly woman in a spotless white habit sat on a wooden stool, her lined face set deep within her starched wimple. She rose quickly to meet her visitors. Her habit, though old, looked freshly laundered and her wimple almost too straight to be true. Sister Angela bowed submissively.

Matt stared. A stool, a metal-framed bed, some old books at the back of a small wooden table. On one wall he could see a brightly colored picture of Jesus Christ, a stylized painting with the Savior's heart visible to indicate God's love. On the opposite wall another painting showed a woman, eyes turned skywards, being consumed by long orange flames. A cross of dark wood hung starkly on the whitewashed plaster behind the bed. The elderly Sister could have come as a time traveler from the past, bringing her furnishings with her. It was eerie.

"Monsieur Corbin would like to talk to you, Sister," said the Mother Superior in a rather condescending voice. "We all want to assure him that his wife was a good Catholic. A caring Christian woman. You came to love her over the past few weeks."

The leading statement made Sister Angela cry gently. "She was so kind to me, monsieur. I do not think I have known such kindness."

A bit of an indictment on the other Sisters, thought Matt, but he could understand something of the care with which *Leanne* would have attended to this old nun. *Leanne* would probably have put herself out for anybody. As Alain and Sister Angela talked, Matt noticed that the Mother Superior was having an inhibiting effect on their conversation. He took the tall woman to join Zoé at the high window.

"Black kites," said Zoé, pointing to the sky.

The Mother Superior nodded. "The kites have always been here. They nest in the large rock below the clinic."

Zoé turned to Matt. "One night I will take a flashlight and climb the rocks to see the nest. They will not fly away so easily in the dark."

"You'll frighten them," Matt warned.

Zoé tutted. "They are not scared of people. They live in towns in the Auvergne where I come from."

Matt turned to the Mother Superior, speaking French. "Where did Sister Angela have the visions?" he asked quietly, while Alain continued talking to Sister Angela in the background.

"You are a Catholic, monsieur?"

Matt shook his head. "I'm prepared to listen. I've come across all sorts of strange experiences."

The Mother Superior gave him a look as though to ask what interest could a mere visitor have in such things. "Strange experiences? That is a rather odd expression, monsieur."

Zoé had gone to the small table to look at the books. She now returned to the window. Matt put his arm round her shoulder. Such a physical gesture might cause a scandal in these hallowed surroundings, but he was doing it out of affection, not making a point. "I gather not everyone has believed Sister Angela."

The Mother Superior shook her head. "It was a long time ago."

"Nearly seventy years," said Zoé. "But surely the first two messages came true?"

"So it would appear."

Matt had to ask the question. "So why do you still have doubts?"

The Mother Superior glanced at Sister Angela who was still deep in conversation with Alain. "You are a perceptive man, Monsieur Rider, but you are in danger of misunderstanding my beliefs."

There was no censorship. The woman appeared to be thawing. Matt decided that it must be his candor more than his faith.

"You see, monsieur," the Mother Superior continued, "a thirteen-year-old girl may well see things that are denied to us older children of God."

"Or imagine them." Matt wondered if this observation was a wise move. He waited for disapproval from Zoé. She said nothing.

The Mother Superior thought for a moment. "Yes, monsieur, I might be inclined to put it down to imagination, if a thirteen-year-old girl came running in today with such a tale. But if after many years she still persisted with her account, and if she showed signs of God's grace in her life, it would be hard to deny the possibility." She lowered her voice, and both Matt and Zoé had to lean forward to hear. "I did once accuse Sister Angela of untruthfulness, but that was before I came to know her as I do now. The visions are important to the Medical Board."

"But she only spoke about two messages."

"Ah, monsieur, that is so. But now Sister Angela claims that she has somehow been made aware that the third message may be coming to pass at this very moment."

"Here, at the clinic?" Matt hardly had the courage to interrupt. "It seemed Leanne was the first person Sister Angela had ever confided in."

"It is something she thinks she heard. Or perhaps I should say, something she thinks she overheard. It is probably of no consequence, and I very much doubt it has any bearing on the purpose of the original visions."

"And what was the purpose of the visions?" asked Matt.

"Ah, a difficult question, Monsieur Rider. What indeed? Soon I hope our humble order will get official validation. Our Lady of Tourvillon. What do you think, monsieur? Such a good title."

Matt noticed that the reply had been deliberately evasive. "The *purpose* of the visions," he persisted.

The woman seemed to be overcome with a sudden need to unburden her heart. "You think there always has to be a purpose? Certainly the Church has a long history of visions, but events frequently get out of hand." She smiled and it looked

like a genuine smile. "Perhaps it is easier for you than it is for a devout Catholic to understand what I am trying to say."

Matt nodded optimistically, but he understood less now than he did before coming.

"You see, my children, a vision frequently receives a hostile reception. Often, I am sorry to say, from the clergy in the local church."

"That cannot be true," said Zoé, who had been sharing her attention between the Mother Superior and Sister Angela. "I was brought up as a Catholic."

"Oh, my child, believe me, I have seen much division and bitterness over such issues."

"But the Church gets plenty of good publicity," said Matt. "I've read about a few of the more famous visions."

"Sometimes the outcome is good, as man views goodness. But the area is frequently unable to cope with the hordes of visitors. The priest and congregation see the vision as a source of easy money and set up stalls—to sell shoddy souvenirs. Tell me, how is God honored by such vulgarity?"

"So visions don't work?" said Matt, his arm still round Zoé's shoulder.

"Infrequently, my child. Whether it is through division or through greed, the people completely lose sight of the Lord's intended message."

A sudden thought struck Matt. "Maybe that's why visionaries don't rush to share their experiences."

The Mother Superior laughed out loud.

"I was being serious," he said.

The smile quickly faded. "Monsieur, you are an extremely perceptive man. It must make our Lord sad to see the way we handle the... the... What was the word you used, my child?"

"Publicity."

"Ah yes." The tall woman sighed. Matt could see surprise in the large eyes set in the untanned Mediterranean skin. "You may not be a member of our Church, monsieur, but what you say is so right. We do not know how to handle the Lord's gifts. It is indeed a wonder that there are any blessed appearances at all. However, of one thing I am sure, a personal relationship with God is worth a thousand visions."

\* \* \* \* \*

AS THEY drove from the site Zoé leaned forward from the small rear seat to switch on the car radio.

"What are you doing?" Matt's thoughts were still on the bright figure of Sister Angela and the rather sad Mother Superior. Somehow he had expected their qualities would have been reversed. The frail Sister seemed fully at ease with her minor role. Perhaps she was fortunate the Church had ignored her for so long.

Zoé kept her hand on the radio. "I am tuning in for our bugs. What is the frequency?"

"Bug." Matt pulled the Mini over to the side of the road. A broad patch of reddish-brown soil marked an area that had recently been scoured by heavy rain. "We only planted one. In the room where we met Kappa and Bernetti. I told you, a job like this needs planning. They'll find it if they do a sweep."



"They will probably find them both." Zoé sounded cheerful. "I put the other one behind the books on the table of Sister Angela."

## Chapter 29

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE ELECTRONIC pager let out a series of high-pitched pulses, stabbing into Mario Bernetti's mind. His thoughts had been far away.

Without a doubt Jim Kappa was using the Pope's visit to further his own ends. If K7 got their way, there would be no stopping the power of the Knight Commanders. Jim had one plan for the Holy Father. He had another.

The small receiver on his belt continued its urgent summons. He reached down and pressed the red button to produce an immediate silence. The small display screen gave the number of the emergency operating room. He picked up his desk phone and dialed.

"Dr. Bernetti," said an anxious voice, "Dr. Kappa needs you in Operating Room Two. Cardiac arrest."

Bernetti grunted a hasty acknowledgement and slammed the phone back in place. Jim had been planning a quick radio nucleotide scan on a British politician's heart. No surgery involved; not yet. He began to run, anxious to be at hand immediately. Seconds counted when a heart had stopped. The brain could suffer irreversible damage. The doors of the operating room were open. There was no time for scrubbing up and a full change of clothing. What had caused the man's heart to stop under an opaque injection for radiography?

The nurse held out a green gown. "Dr. Kappa was preparing to do an optical inspection," she explained. "The anesthetist had only just begun. ECG's gone wild, temperature's one hundred and seven, and there's no pulse."

Kappa stood pale-faced beside an inert figure which was naked apart from black trunks. The patient's chest had been shaved, painted bright orange, his face now hidden by the oxygen mask. The full emergency team was in action, rubbing packs of ice over the sweating body. Quickly a nurse applied two large pads of the high voltage defibrillator to the chest. Kappa glanced up, gave the signal, and the patient jerked violently as a massive charge of electricity smashed through his body.

"We're losing him." Kappa turned to the anesthetist. "What the hell are you pumping into him?"

Mario Bernetti studied the readings. "The defibrillator again. Now!"

The body arched under the high voltage.

The flat trace of the ECG rose in a series of erratic pulses. The patient's heart was back in action but the beats were too rapid. Suddenly the frantic tone of the electrocardiograph slowed to a series of irregular pulses, then recorded a steady heartbeat.

"We've got him back," said Kappa quietly.

"It's a miracle," said the senior operating room nurse, crossing herself with a quick movement. "Thank God for another miracle."

"Thanks, Mario." Kappa wiped his forehead with a large tissue. "Malignant hypothermia. Now we have to get his temperature down." He looked in no condition to continue. "A close thing, Mario. We must change the anesthetic. The sooner I get the endoscope inside his chest the sooner we can have the answer. I was looking for myocardial necrosis. Hell of a time to lose a patient, with the Pope coming."

"It sound like it turning into a major," said Bernetti.

Kappa agreed. "I brought the operation forward so I could get the answer quickly. I was hoping to get as many patients as possible through here before the big day."

"You look all in, Jim. Maybe I take over. I got experience in heart surgery." He turned to the senior nurse. "A shot of dantrolene sodium and intravenous fluids."

"Jack of all trades, that's what we call someone like you." Jim Kappa was smiling now. "Toxins, pathology, cardiology and now neurosurgery. You've done the rounds—and shone at every point. Talented."

Bernetti tried to smile. "Talented? Dotato. A good word."

"Sure, Mario, and no one doubts your skill. Thanks. I'd like you to stay and help."

Bernetti went to the trolley to administer the IV.

"I'd like you with me when the Pope is in the operating room, Mario." Kappa's color returned as he began to check the cardiograph, the machine now beeping regularly. "You saved the day here."

Bernetti smiled. "*Grazie*, Jim." At least he would be in the operating room with the Holy Father. He could use his experience to prevent Jim Kappa having his way. The recorder on the trolley churned out a long strip of paper. Bernetti noticed the nurse cross herself again in a simple prayer. Who could he pray to for the right outcome to the Pope's visit? Certainly not to God. A lapsed Catholic, long outside the power of the Church, he was Mario Bernetti, the famous Italian neurosurgeon. But Archbishop Valdieri was here to spoil things with his inquiry. Nothing was secret from that man.

Bernetti tore the printed paper trace from the recorder. Always something to worry about.

## Chapter 30

### Tourvillon Village

"JUST HURRY UP and tune it in." Zoé returned to the small cramped seat of the orange Mini, sounding unrepentant.

"You're mad." Matt felt furious.

A quarter of a mile behind them the white building of the Clinic of the Little Sisters dominated the hillside. The heavy steel gates were now open but the barrier was down. Matt felt vulnerable in the car.

"If they do a sweep they'll guess it was us. I bet they don't get many visitors." He thought for a moment. "Well, not visitors who go to the senior executive's office *and* Sister Angela's room on the same day."

Alain Corbin looked on in bewilderment.

"I am sorry, Alain." Matt switched to French. "Zoé has done something stupid with one of *les micros*."

"Ah, *les micros*."

"It is not stupid!" Zoé retorted. "I saw the medical records of Leanne. She found out something *accablant*."

"*Accablant*?" The word was new to Matt.

Zoé nodded. "It means devastating," she said in English.

"They certainly had a nasty way of keeping her quiet," Matt said quietly. "But I still don't like those bugs being up there."

"Well they are!" snapped Zoé. "So now we will listen in."

Matt flicked slowly up the frequencies until the normal broadcasts of talking and music had been left behind. The RDS player was one of the few modern additions to this rusting wreck. "There, that should be one of them."

The radio stayed silent.

"Perhaps no one is talking," suggested Zoé, sounding a little more reasonable now. "Try the other one,"

Matt went almost to the top of the FM frequency on the digital display. "Quiet." He raised his hand. The sound was broken by a strong echo. He turned to Zoé. "I said those transmitters were rubbish."

"It sounds like they are talking from inside a garbage can. With the lid on." Zoé sat back in disappointment. "So now we all go to jail -- just because we listen to someone talking inside a garbage can."

Matt tried to set the tuning more precisely. "It's breaking up. That's typical of a bug with a flat battery."

"You are the PI, the expert." Zoé spoke again in English, a sign that she was annoyed. "You should have tested them first."

"I didn't know you were going to be crazy enough to use them. You rushed me into this, Zoé."

"Would it be better if we drove closer?" She was ignoring his excuses. "You said they have a very short range."

"They have zero range when the batteries go flat."

"Then you had better get under the fence to fit new ones."

Matt tried the tuning again but the signal had gone. "We don't have any spares—and I'm not going under *anything*. Or over it. If they catch me, they could have me in that operating room. I'd probably end up singing falsetto in the White Lion next Christmas."

They could hear a large vehicle climbing the hill in low gear. A long-distance bus turned the corner, making its way laboriously towards the clinic.

"*Les touristes*," said Alain.

"Young men," observed Zoé, raising her eyebrows. "I wonder what they want."

"They look like soldiers," said Alain.

"Could be," agreed Matt. "Or police. No uniforms though. Just as well I'm not squeezing underneath the wire. That settles it. We're going back to Avignon."

As the bus approached the gates, the man at the guardhouse raised the barrier and allowed it to drive through without stopping.

"Remember," said Zoé, looking at her watch, "Dr. Kappa told us we had to be away by midday. It is a security exercise."

"They're certainly taking it seriously." Matt pushed the fine tune button on the radio. Suddenly the voices started again. Someone seemed to be calling out loudly, something in English. It sounded like, *They've arrived. Tell Dr. Kappa.* But the sound was distorted. Then something he couldn't catch.

"What has this place got to do with the Pope?" asked Zoé in surprise.

"Pope?" asked Matt.

"They said something about the Pope."

Matt shook his head. "You're thinking about the boring history lesson I gave you in Avignon."

Zoé turned to Alain. "Did you hear something about the Pope?"

Alain shrugged apologetically. "It was not clear, and my English is not good."

"You men are hopeless." Zoé leaned forward. "They must have left the room."

"More likely the battery's dead." Matt started the engine. "If they're holding a security exercise they'll have those soldiers out here, checking all parked vehicles."

"If they *were* soldiers," added Zoé.

"Probably a Vatican outing." Matt let the clutch in. He felt angry and helpless.

The wheels slipped on the orange soil as the car accelerated down to the village of Tourvillon, the small engine buzzing. At some stage in its life the old Mini had been fitted with twin carbs, giving it a surprising turn of speed, although not so impressive with three people on board.

He called to Zoé as he slammed the gearshift down into second and braked enthusiastically for the bend. "You're so observant, I'm surprised you didn't notice the Pope sitting in the front seat."

"I saw him." Zoé sounded peevish. "He was driving."

## Chapter 31

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

VALDIERI SNATCHED up his phone on its second ring. The clock on the windowsill showed the time as fifteen minutes after midday.

"Valdieri speaking."

"Stephen, this is Umberto, at the Vatican. The Holy Father is in no condition to travel." There was a pause. "Ten minutes ago the Medical Assembly refused permission for us to move him anywhere." Umberto could be a forceful man who regularly managed to get his own way. It was unlike him to sound defeated.

"What's wrong?"

There was another pause. "This is in absolute confidence. We have a problem. With the medical team."

Valdieri picked up the anxiety in the Private Secretary's voice. "Dr. Bisenti?"

"Dr. Bisenti *and* Professor Rossano. Severe food poisoning. There is no way either of them will be leaving Rome for a few days."

"Surely the Holy Father can be flown to Tourvillon without them." He looked at the clock but a movement outside the window caught his eye. The bus that had brought the GIGN from Istres was already leaving. An enterprising idea of his to use civilian transport. No one would have paid attention to a tourist bus coming from the autoroute south of Avignon. "The Holy Father is not leaving Rome, Stephen, and that's final. The Medical Assembly still has faith in Dr. Kappa and his team at Tourvillon, so they want them to fly to the Vatican immediately."

Valdieri groaned. "We've been through all this. Tourvillon is a holy site, Umberto. Will the Church be happy if the Holy Father dies in Rome, when he could so easily have been healed here?"

"What you say makes sense." Umberto sounded resigned to disaster. "Unfortunately everyone in the Medical Assembly is adamant."

Valdieri was unable to conceal his frustration. "Suddenly we have a major hold-up," he snapped. "The Medical Assembly argue amongst each other, we both spend time discussing options, and the Holy Father's condition deteriorates by the hour. Isn't that so?"

"That's just about it, Stephen."

Why was it that experts could never agree on the correct action to take—if they were all so clever? "And what would *you* do, Umberto?"

Umberto sounded weary. "I would welcome your views, Stephen."

Valdieri did not even bother to affect hesitation. "If it was up to me I'd put the Holy Father on a helicopter and have him up here before the Little Sisters could finish evensong." He paused. "But I'm in charge of papal security, not health."

"It might be possible, Stephen."

Valdieri felt his heart thump. The prospect was dynamite, a step of blind faith. Umberto was a man who could fix most things. "Help me, Umberto."

There was a considerable pause. "With what?"

"Sometimes we have to take the decision-making out of the hands of others. Call it intuition."

"A way that seems right to man, Stephen?"

Valdieri felt his stomach sink. Umberto was referring to the same verse from Proverbs that the Holy Father had used in Rome. *There is a way that seems right to a man.* The Bible could sometimes pack a powerful punch. Was God saying something? "*But the end is the way of death,*" he finished aloud for the second time.

"It's like a farmyard full of headless chickens down here with Rossano and Bisenti out of the way. I might be able to get the three signatures we need. Do you want me to try?"

Valdieri bit his lip. "I'm *instructing* you to do it, Umberto."

There was another delay while Umberto considered this order. "We could lose our positions through this, Archbishop."

"The Holy Father could lose his life while we pussyfoot around following the niceties of ecclesiastical protocol. Get the three signatures and have that helicopter in the air this afternoon. And make sure the Holy Father is on board. Understand?"

Umberto seemed to be going through anguish. "You are sure?"

Valdieri wasn't prepared to think about it any longer. "Yes, I'm sure." Perhaps in his frustration he sounded too harsh. "Relax, Umberto, it will work out." He replaced the clock on the windowsill. Twelve-twenty. If Umberto moved quickly, the Pope could be in Avignon and into the operating room for an exploratory before teatime. He must pray to God that the obstinate bureaucrats in the Vatican would quickly see sense.

## Chapter 32

### Convent of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

SISTER ANGELA had been listening to men coming and going for over an hour. Reverend Mother had told her to stay in her room until evensong, yet she longed to know what was happening outside. She would be able to see down into the grounds if she had her bed by the window. But the heavy metal frame refused to move one jot. The deep voices fascinated and at the same time annoyed her.

She took the brown leather book of hand-written meditations from the small table. The Reflections of the Blessed Marguerite of Caspia, copied laboriously by hand in 1793. But today the fading lines of brown ink provided no nourishment for her soul. The voices were French. It made a change from the English she usually heard when people stopped to talk below her window. Englishmen, Americans, all of them talking a language she had never learned.

There were not many friendly voices from strangers in Tourvillon. The Lady in blue had been so gentle, so dependable. Tried and tested, found truthful in all she said. First the destruction by the Germans, then the construction of the hospital. But had the surgeon meant to say such a dreadful thing? Pray God there was a mistake.

She should have told the Archbishop more about the surgeon. The beads of the rosary brought no comfort now. She looked across at her small table. It had never occurred to her before, but it was light enough to move to the window, yet strong enough to take her weight.

"Holy Jesus, please give me strength."

She grasped the front of the table that held her books and pulled it away from the wall. One of the books slid down the back and landed on the floor tiles with a sharp sound. Something had fallen with it. A crucifix? She dropped to her knees and groped under the table in the semi darkness. The floor felt rough, and small pieces of grit stuck to her fingers. Reverend Mother would not like to know there was dirt under the table.

Sister Angela stared at the object in surprise. All these years living in this room and never once had she seen such a strange thing. The small black box fascinated her. It was modern. It was unusual. It was...

"Sister Angela!"

"Oh, Reverend Mother." As she struggled to get up she caught her feet in her long white habit and rolled backwards, probably looking like a large sheep rolling down the hillside below the Convent.

"Are you unwell, Sister Angela?"

It took her a few seconds to regain her bearings, and slightly longer to sit upright on the floor. "Oh no, Reverend Mother, I dropped a book. I was picking it up when I found this." She held up the strange article.

The Mother Superior took hold of her hand and pulled hard. As Sister Angela came to her feet the Mother Superior began to brush the dust from her clothing. "Sometimes you behave like a little child, Sister, rolling around on the floor. Let me see what you have found."

Almost guiltily she handed over the miniature black box. "It is not mine, Reverend Mother."

"And you have never seen it before?"

"Never, Reverend Mother. I swear before God and all the saints..."

"Your word will suffice, Sister. I will take this to Dr. Kappa. It may be part of the clinic's medical equipment. Perhaps Nurse Leanne left it."

"Thank you, Reverend Mother."

"I came to tell you a secret, Sister Angela. We are preparing for a most important visitor. I cannot say any more, but for his safety this building will be occupied by men who have come to protect him."

Now she knew the reason for the voices in the garden. "There will be men in my room?"

"Of course not, Sister Angela. You and the other Sisters will share the guest room by the garden. I do not wish to spell it out, but I cannot allow the Sisters to remain in this building with men. It would be most improper."

"Improper, Reverend Mother?" Suddenly Sister Angela felt terror filling her body. "Oh, Reverend Mother, I am so afraid. Tell me about the important visitor."

The Mother Superior made soothing noises with her lips. "You are safe from men now, Sister Angela."

"No, I am not afraid of the men, Reverend Mother. I beg you, tell me who is coming. It must not be the Holy Father."

"What nonsense you talk, Sister Angela."

"I heard the surgeon speaking about him. No, Mother, it must not be the Holy Father."

She flung herself at the figure of authority whose presence she always welcomed but had never touched. Her arms were now around the tall body. In her desperation she pulled herself closer to the warm, soft front. "They are going to kill the Holy Father—I know they are!"

## Chapter 33

### Tourvillon Village

"I AM ONLY thinking of you, Alain."

Matt held his beer glass and looked up at the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon. The large building stood stark white in the summer sun, dominating the landscape visible between the shuttered houses on the street out of the village. Even the black kites must have found it too hot to soar over the huge rock.

"You ought to be home."

"Matt is right," agreed Zoé. "You have had a shock to your system."

Alain was in no mood for advice. "I think we should get back inside the clinic." His glass had been empty for some time. Matt thought it unwise to offer a refill. The Frenchman raised his head slowly. "Why are we wasting time drinking? Zoé can have another look at Leanne's records."

"Okay, okay." Matt held up his hands. "But we're not doing anything today. I need a good look at their security."

"I will help if I can," offered Alain.

Matt had an idea. "Can you borrow one of your brother's cassocks? I could dress as a priest and go in with you tomorrow morning."

"You? A priest?" Zoé began to laugh.

"I've done stranger things," retorted Matt.

Zoé turned in surprise. "You never told me. Anyway, how do *I* get in? Dressed as a nun?"

"You're not coming." Matt could see trouble ahead. "We need you on the outside to get help if things go wrong." He finished his beer and looked at the hospital through the bottom of the glass. A future, recovering paintings for Ken Habgood's clients for peanuts seemed preferable—even with the occasional scaffold pole coming through the back window.

He spoke quietly to Zoé. Alain seemed too wrapped up in his own thoughts to be paying attention. "We'll come back when it's dark. But only for a look from outside the fence. The security exercise should be over by then."

"And I can look for the nest of the black kites in the rocks," added Zoé. "I will bring a flashlight."

Matt put out his hand. "No flashlights," he said sharply.

\* \* \* \* \*

MAXWELL WILCOX turned the black bug over in disbelief. "We'll have to tell the GIGN."

"I'm not sure we should even be talking." Kappa pulled his security chief out into the garden. "The whole clinic might be bugged, as well as the Convent. They always say it's safer to talk outdoors."

Major Louviers of the GIGN was appalled to be shown the listening device in Maxwell Wilcox's hand. "You found this in a Sister's room in the *Convent*? How many more are there?" He spoke perfect English and probably knew most European languages as part of his profession



Wilcox shook his head. "There may not be any more."

"When did you last carry out a sweep?" demanded Louviers.

Wilcox shrugged. "Dr. Kappa has never given instructions for a sweep in the Convent."

Kappa stood back. "I leave all aspects of security to you, Wilcox."

Detecting the distancing by his boss, the head of security fought off his anxiety. If someone had bugged the clinic, the patients would never forgive them. Adverse publicity could close the place. "I'll see to it."

"No!" Louviers turned to Kappa. "I have fourteen men in my command. They will do it. I am more worried about the clinic than the nuns, so they will start their search here in the clinic."

Jim Kappa nodded.

"Let's be careful what we say," warned Louviers, tapping the black bug.

"Hell!" Kappa began to understand just how far-reaching the effects could be.

Louviers examined the bug carefully. "If it's any consolation, this device is not from an expert surveillance team. Most likely it's someone local. A cleaner perhaps. I need the names of everyone with access to the Sister's rooms." He turned to Maxwell Wilcox. "And keep your team of clowns out of my way."

\* \* \* \* \*

"SO NOW we know that there are at least *two* bugs." Major Louviers smashed his fist onto the table when his men found the one in the plant pot in Clarkson's office. "Just what sort of security set-up have you been running here, Wilcox?"

The small American in the navy blazer could only look down at his hands. "My security has always been regarded as adequate by Dr. Kappa."

"Adequate?" demanded Louviers. "How do you judge that to be so?"

Maxwell Wilcox held onto the second device. "How can these bugs threaten the Pope? There are only the two, and the one from the Convent has a flat battery."

"And you think they were concealed like that?" Louviers muttered something Wilcox was unable to hear, then called to one of his men. "Get the rest of our anti-surveillance kit from Istres, Jacques. Within the hour. I'm putting a hold on all movements in and out of this site until we've done a full sweep."

"They're only here to make a fuss, Jim." Wilcox made sure his voice was just loud enough to be heard by the GIGN Major.

"It seems you know nothing about electronic surveillance, Monsieur Wilcox," retorted Louviers. "These cheap bugs could be a blind, to stop amateurs like you looking further. You're a fool."

"Yes, you're a fool, Wilcox," repeated Kappa. "You'd better listen to what the Major wants you to do."

"Then I'm not off the job?" asked Wilcox, wondering if he was to be allowed to assist, and thereby retain some credibility.

"You can do some groundwork on these batteries," said Louviers shortly. "Find the current drain on them and work out their life in days and hours. There's still some life left in them, and I want to know when they were planted. You have one hour to tell me *exactly* how long those bugs have been running."

"Assuming the batteries were new." Wilcox felt his position being abused. He was not here to run errands for the GIGN. Yet Jim Kappa seemed to be enjoying his discomfort.

Louviers shook his head. "Monsieur Wilcox, what sort of person would start a surveillance job with a flat battery?"

\* \* \* \* \*

BERNETTI SHARED Kappa's unease as soon as he was informed of the discovery. The thought that someone was monitoring the site appalled him. There were discussions about patients that would cause severe embarrassment if they were recorded. Not only the names of VIPs would be heard, but the intimate consultations on their medical conditions.

"The Vatican, they do it," Bernetti announced when Louviers had gone. "We all know they want to end K7."

"Archbishop Valdieri?" Kappa nodded. "That man was in Sister Angela's room this morning."

"Maybe the Holy Father he not coming. Maybe it only a pretence to get the Archbishop here with his bugs."

"That's nonsense. The bugs were there long enough for the batteries to go flat. The Vatican is bringing the visit forward to this evening. Unfortunately both of the Holy Father's personal physicians have gone down sick."

"So who put the bug in the room of Sister Angela?"

"Perhaps there's one in every room."

"Oh, my God!" Bernetti put his hands to his head and desperately tried to recall every conversation, every private phone call. The Vatican had the place under surveillance. Archbishop Valdieri was a viper. But Valdieri had only just arrived. Could it have been the nurse? Had Nurse Corbin placed those bugs in the clinic?

Bernetti hurried through the beds of lavender, his hands pressing on his cheeks. Nurse Corbin had been asking questions about the Knights. He'd even caught her in his room. God, it was all so frightening. Jim Kappa, as Knight Commander, had the most to lose by an investigation. Jim must take the blame. Unless, of course, Archbishop Valdieri also knew about...

He felt the blood drain from his face.

## Chapter 34

### Avignon

"I COULD see it coming." Zoé used her professional nurse's voice. "Everyone thinks they are immune to shock. It is why Alain was so bright."

"He did seem a bit peculiar," agreed Matt. "Anyway, he'll be better off at home. Not that I'd want to mope around all by myself if anything happened to you."

"You would, I think, be out enjoying yourself."

Matt put his hand on Zoé's arm. The death of Leanne made him realize just how much Zoé meant to him. "I doubt it."

The bar in the Place De l'Horloge facing the old roundabout had become their favorite site in town. Not so much for the coffee as for the atmosphere and the view. As the staff got to know them the speed of service improved, but only slightly. Matt found an inside table away from other customers where they could talk freely.

"When I worked for the police I was part of a team," he said at last. "We could back each other up." He watched two Americans debating whether to come inside to eat. Unable to understand the menu the woman complained loudly to her male companion about the lack of respect shown to tourists, with all these foreign words. He looked at Zoé. "Women can be a real pain at times," he added with a grin.

She pushed her chair back. "You stay here, Saint George. I will go to a telephone and find out if Ken has the lab report yet."

"Those disgusting samples?"

The American couple moved on and started to argue with each other outside the smart restaurant next door.

Zoé produced her phone card from her purse. "And I am also going to ask him if he has looked at the CDs."

"I can't think they're important," said Matt. "If Kappa is pirating music or computer software he's hardly going to kill anyone who finds out."

"Do not rush me, Matt. I am, I think, putting all the pieces together slowly. While I phone Ken, you can get me another *café crème*." She winked at him. "*S'il vous plaît*."

Matt guessed that the restaurant next door had a menu in English because the two Americans were now making their way inside. Alone, he leaned forward and flicked at a wasp that had been licking something sticky off the table. The late afternoon breeze just about made the heat bearable out of the sun. The town center had filled with tourists, apparently with no more on their minds than getting into the Papal Palace before making their way to the river for a walk on the famous Pont D'Avignon, the bridge of Saint Benzet to nowhere.

The wasp returned and continued cleaning the table. Matt reflected on what he and Zoé had done. They had attempted to carry out illegal surveillance on a world famous center of healing—with useless kit—because of a chance remark in this bar by a nurse with a virus eating away at her brain. Even the husband had been willing them on, until bursting into tears on the way back from Tourvillon this afternoon.

Life was a bitch.

He was almost asleep, his head leaning against the wall, when Zoé kicked at his legs. "It is serious, Matt."

"What's serious?"

"Ken, he has the preliminary results. Four of the six biopsy samples have come out clear."

"Lucky patients." The wasp was now on his arm. He hit it and it dropped to the floor where he squashed it with his foot. "Oh boy, Leanne really screwed things up. How are the patients going to find out they're okay?"

"Chief Inspector Rider, you are too slow to be a policeman. Those samples, they were probably duplicates. The others, I think, were sent to the lab by the clinic."

"So?"

"So they belonged to six different people. And only two have the cancer cells."

"Then it's good news for the other four."

"I cannot explain things while you are in such a silly mood. And where is *mon café*?"

"I forgot," confessed Matt.

"You were sleeping."

"I didn't know how long you'd be." Matt signaled to the waiter who responded immediately when he noticed Zoé.

Zoé was clearly on a roll. "You must help me find a way to get us into the computer records."

"Sit down, Florence Nightingale. Tell me what Ken said."

"He says he did not bother to open *les micros* to check the batteries. He thought you would buy the new ones here. That man is *radin*, stingy. But there is, I think, one good thing about it." She looked up and smiled as the waiter put two coffees on the table. "If the bugs have the flat batteries, the men at the clinic will not be able to find them. So they will not have the suspicions. Am I right or am I right?"

"I think we're both wrong."

"Just get me into the main office. I will, what do you say, blow that place apart and be famous."

Matt put his hand round his cup. "I can't think of a sensible way to get us in there to make you famous."

"Keep working on it, *mon cher*. Leanne was right, they are doing something bad on the hill at Tourvillon."

\* \* \* \* \*

"THERE IS nothing you can do to stop the flight, Major Louviers. The Holy Father is already airborne." Archbishop Valdieri paused. He'd not intended to throw his authority at the GIGN man. Louviers was exceptional, the perfect choice for guarding this site.

Louviers shook his head. "You are wrong, Your Excellency. While I am in command here I take orders from no one, not even the President of France. You will stop the flight. Is that clear?"

Valdieri ran his eyes over the leader of the anti-terrorist unit. The man was physically powerful, with a build made to look even harder by the massive .44 Magnum he wore in a body holster over a bulletproof jacket. Valdieri looked down at his cassock of thin black cotton. The power of the world, and the power of the Church. But did either of them have any real power when it came to controlling the Papal visit?

"Listen, Your Excellency, I need two clear days. My team members have to familiarize themselves with the layout of the site and the surroundings. We have to check for explosives and bugs. Do I make my position clear?"

"Major Louviers, the Holy Father will die if we delay his arrival. Even if the whole site has been bugged it may have no connection with his visit. I say we stop worrying."

Louviers took the radio from his belt and set the control to scrambler mode. "Your Excellency, if you refuse to order the helicopter to return to Rome, I cannot guarantee the Pope's safety."

Valdieri looked at his watch. "ETA is twenty-five minutes."

"Then turn the flight around. Now."

"And have the Holy Father die on the return journey? Where lies the greater risk, Major? In the air, or here on the ground? You have already carried out two anti-surveillance sweeps and found nothing more."

"I hope to God we're right." Louviers spoke into the radio. "Lieutenant, are the new perimeter sensors in place?"

The voice on the radio reported that they were.

"And the security lodge looks normal?"

It did.

"Good. Now listen well, lieutenant. In just over twenty minutes our guest is arriving by helicopter. It didn't get my vote, but it's happening. I want no radio communication except through the scrambler circuits. Is that clear? And no one, absolutely no one, is to mention the name of our guest on the air. Got it?"

The lieutenant responded that he had got it all.

Louviers flicked the radio to standby. "Good man that. Will there be an armed escort with the Pope?"

"Not on board his helicopter. There are two machines. The second one is carrying an Italian army unit. Paris has cleared the flight, but it will not be landing. The instant the Holy Father is on the ground his security is in your hands, Major."

Louviers picked up his radio again and asked for an update. "Has Wilcox been in touch with the battery manufacturers?" He relayed the reply to the Archbishop. "Japanese batteries. The batch number is only sold on the British market." He switched to standby. "I think we can safely assume that those bugs have been in place for at least four weeks."

"Does that help?"

"It ought to. How long ago did anyone first mention the Holy Father's visit?"

"A month. Perhaps a little less. Dr. Kappa has written several letters to the Vatican. There have been visits here by Vatican staff since the Holy Father became ill, myself included. Final arrangements have only been discussed within the past few days."

"Who would know that the Holy Father is coming?"

Valdieri thought for a moment. "It is still a closely guarded secret in Rome. I cannot say what has been happening at this end."

Louviers put his finger on the transmit button. "Somehow I think you and I are going to get on fine, Your Excellency. It is just unfortunate that Monsieur Wilcox is in our way."

"A belief I share with you, Major."

Louviers winked at Valdieri as he spoke into the radio. "Captain, tell Monsieur Wilcox to get onto the battery manufacturers and find out exactly when that batch was first on the market ... Yes, I know they're Japanese, but this is a priority. Tell him I want the answer before he goes to bed." Louviers switched the radio to standby. "That should ensure the local boy is nicely out of the way when the

Pope's helicopter arrives. Excuse the crudity, Your Excellency, but the last thing you and I need is a smart-ass out there trying to run the show."

## Chapter 35

### Avignon

"YOU ARE good friends to me. I only wish we had met while Leanne was still alive."

"We want to make sure you are all right." Zoé sounded concerned.

Alain had opened the door of his house cautiously, and now invited them to come inside. A woman stood self-consciously in the room.

"I'm Mazie Meyran," she explained somewhat bashfully in passable French. "I'm a nurse at the clinic. Leanne and I were friends."

Matt shook hands while Zoé and the nurse kissed briefly. The kitchen that doubled as a living room was a scene frozen in time. Matt noticed the drooping flowers in the blue vase on the windowsill and he felt a sudden pain in his throat. Leanne had probably put them there herself.

As soon as Mazie realized Matt and Zoé spoke English she did the same.

"You're from New Mexico," said Matt. "Leanne mentioned you when we met her in Avignon."

Mazie smiled. "Sure, we both grew up in New Mexico. Leanne came from Albuquerque, I come from Silver City. But when you're in France that makes us almost neighbors. I traveled here to trace my great granddad's roots, and liked the place so much I took a job at the clinic." She blushed. "I've even learned to speak the French lingo."

"Did you find your roots?"

She shook her head. "Still looking. Some place south of here I reckon. Perhaps one day."

Matt sensed that Mazie Meyran and Alain were embarrassed to have been found together in the house, though it was no business of his. Maybe his work had made him suspicious of extra-marital affairs. Anyway, Mazie's visit was probably innocent; the caring act of a good friend.

As soon as Mazie had gone, Alain coughed, as though it would clear things up. "Leanne's family are flying from New Mexico for the funeral service next Thursday. They want the burial to be in Albuquerque, but I told them Leanne belongs in France, to me. You think I am right?"

"Of course you are," said Matt.

"There are bad people at the clinic," said Alain unexpectedly.

Zoé moved to his side. "Alain," she said quietly, "I want to know exactly what Leanne told you."

The muscular mechanic's shoulders rose and then dropped slowly. "I do not know what to do. I do not want to stay here in the house. You have your car?"

Matt nodded.

"I would like to go back to Tourvillon, to be near where Leanne died."

"You need to rest," insisted Zoé.

"When I am here by myself I cry all the time. I want you to help me uncover the truth."

Matt jiggled the car keys in his hand. "We could drive up to Tourvillon and have something to eat in the village. But no more alcohol. And you can tell us everything you know about Leanne's work."

\* \* \* \* \*

FIFTEEN MINUTES later they were driving the Mini through the narrow village streets, the bodywork thumping on its small wheels and rock-hard suspension. The residents of the old buildings had flung open the shutters, allowing the cool breeze from the hills to replace the hot air that had crept through the closed windows during the afternoon.

As they came into the small square Alain reached across and put a hand on the steering wheel. "We will go no further," he said slowly. "You were right, my friends, it is too painful. Too many memories of Leanne working here. What have you done with the samples she gave you?"

"We sent them to London," said Zoé. "More than half were healthy tissue."

"Then that is good." Alain climbed slowly from the Mini and stretched his arms. "Good for those patients who are clear. They are the lucky ones, eh?"

"That's what I told Zoé," said Matt.

"You are forgetting the labels." Zoé walked across the village square towards the iron pump in the ornate stone water fountain. Matt and Alain followed. "The labels said the diagnosis was positive for cancer cells in every case. Dr. Kappa had signed them."

"Perhaps a mistake by your laboratory?" Alain shrugged his shoulders. Under the trees a group of men played *pétanque*, the dust rising in the still air as the shiny metal balls landed heavily on the uneven pitch. There were no spectators to the game.

"I know the laboratory where Ken went," said Zoé. "Their results are provisional but they would never get it wrong."

Alain said nothing and went on ahead, past the fountain and up the main street towards the clinic. The sudden appearance of a green military helicopter swooping over the hill made him stop. A white helicopter followed close behind. The leading craft stayed over the building, leaving the white machine to continue downwards, hugging the contour of the slope so closely that it seemed to be having difficulty stopping as it descended on the clinic. The pilot let the machine overrun and pass over the village. Or maybe he was checking out the area for a safe landing. The rotors beat the air with a heavy throb that echoed through the cobbled streets.

"More wealthy guests for the clinic." Alain had his hand to his eyes as a shield against the bright sky. "And they will survive. Everyone survives, except my Leanne."

As the machine banked low over the rooftops, the faces of two passengers peered down into the village square.

Alain gripped Zoé firmly by the arm. "*Mon dieu, c'est incroyable!*"

The white helicopter pulled round in a circle and was soon touching down out of sight behind the clinic. The massive military machine hovered overhead like a mother bird guarding her young.

Alain kept his grip firmly on Zoé as the military helicopter rose and headed south. The beat of rotors from the white machine behind the clinic was already slowing, the sound being carried clearly in the evening air.

Alain seemed stunned. "That, *mes amis*, was *le Pape*, the Pope." He crossed himself twice with his free hand.

## Chapter 36

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THERE WAS no doubt in his mind, the surgeon had not stood up to the questions well.

Valdieri paused in his writing, his pen of rolled gold and red lacquer pressed against his cheek as the sound of the helicopters shattered the silence of his private suite. Another five minutes and he would have finished.

Quickly he ran his eye down the page. An email might not be secure. For security he would have to transmit the handwritten sheet directly from his personal fax machine. Umberto would take the necessary action at the other end.

*MEMO FROM ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN VALDIERI*

*My dear Umberto,*

*I have spoken again with Dr. Kappa and Dr. Bernetti, the two senior surgeons here at the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon. Although I can confirm my suspicions of their involvement with the Knights of the Holy Succession, I refuse to believe that the Holy Father is in danger from such an organization. However, one of the Sisters at the Convent claims to have overheard...*

He left the line unfinished for the moment. It was vital to get the wording right before transmission. K7 had a membership that ran like tentacles through the Church, like a fatal cancer through a body. The surgeon's involvement was probably the tip of an iceberg of corruption. Apart from Umberto, who else in the Vatican would see this sheet? He continued to read the first draft.

*It is essential that I gain the confidence of Sister Angela. She has recently experienced a traumatic event but is unwilling to divulge sufficient details for me to judge its significance. I want you to make confidential inquiries for me in Rome concerning an incident that took place several years ago in the Gemelli Hospital when...*



He stopped and shook his head. No, he must not falter at this stage. He must name the disgraceful incident—and name the man he suspected of culpability. If his own life was forfeited in the search for truth, his successor must know the reason.

## Chapter 37

### Tourvillon Village

"NO WONDER they're having a security exercise." Matt stayed ahead as they walked forward, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Pope walking in the grounds. "Those must have been his guards on the bus."

"If the Holy Father is here for treatment, I am worried for him." Zoé stopped to shake a small stone from her shoe. "Me, I would not trust the clinic with a sick bluebottle."

"Perhaps he is only here to visit the Little Sisters," suggested Alain.

"Is the Pope ill?" asked Matt. "You should know, Alain; your brother is a priest."

Alain shrugged. "There are things we do not hear in church. Yes, maybe the Holy Father has not been well lately. The Vatican cancelled his visit to Germany last month."

"I would love to go through the clinic records," said Zoé.

The road up to the clinic became open, with only the large outcrop of rock for cover.

"Leanne said they were doing something bad." Alain shrugged. "I do not trust them either."

The rotors began their loud beat once more, and the white craft rose quickly from behind the main building. It dropped towards the valley and took a southerly course.

"They have frightened my black kites," complained Zoé. "Well, Matt, are you going in?"

"I said I'd look."

"And?"

"I've looked. There are men up there with submachine guns." He had not taken his eyes off the grounds. "Two of them ran between those buildings. I bet they thought everyone would be watching the chopper."

"Armed men? In that case, Matt, you are not cutting your way through the wire."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," he responded tersely.

Zoé caught him by the shoulder. "I tell you there is evidence about Leanne in their records, but you do not listen."

Matt turned to face Zoé and pulled her hands away. "Tell us again."

Zoé spread her hands in a typical *geste gallique*. She glanced at Alain. "We know Leanne was investigating the clinic, and suddenly she is dead."

"That's hardly proof." Matt couldn't make sense of Zoé's line of reasoning, especially as she was talking in French for Alain's sake. "Are the patients in need of surgery or not?"

"Perhaps you get a stomach ache," said Zoé, sitting on the sun-scorched grass by the side of the road to empty her shoe yet again. "What do you think, Matt?"

"I think maybe I ate something bad."

"But you get it a few times."

"Okay, I start to worry."

"And then?"

"If I've got any sense I go to the doctor."

"And what does he say?"

"What's this, a game of consequences?"

Zoé put her shoe back on. "Just think it through, Matt."

"Okay, the doctor says not to worry. So I stop worrying, and the pain gets better."

"But maybe it gets worse."

"Right," agreed Matt. "It gets worse."

"So the doctor sends you to a specialist." Zoé shook her other shoe upside down. "So what is running through your mind?"

"You nurses always think the worst. Yes, maybe I think the worst too."

"And you would go for surgery?"

"If the specialist advised it, of course I'd go. The sooner the better."

"And the expense would not be spared?"

"Not if I could afford private treatment." Matt ran his fingers through his hair before feeling his stomach. Imagination was a powerful thing.

Zoé nodded. "Wealthy people are prepared to spend a fortune when their life is at stake."

"Now hang on." It was a huge leap in logic, but Matt could see what Zoé was driving at. He got quickly to his feet and brushed the brown dust from his jeans. "Are you suggesting the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon is only treating make-believe conditions?"

Zoé held her hands out. "Of course not. Let us say that most of the patients of Dr. Kappa are being treated for serious ailments."

Alain looked at Matt. "Leanne thought some of the people were not ill, but I told her she was imagining things."

Zoé nodded. "Try to remember what Leanne said."

Alain shook his head slowly. "I am sorry, I think I will never get over Leanne's death. We loved each other very much."

Matt waited a moment before turning to Zoé. "Those samples. You say four out of six were the wrong results? On that basis two thirds of the patients are healthy. Their surgery is unnecessary."

"Ah, but those were the samples that made Leanne suspicious," said Zoé. "I am not suggesting that over half the operations are unnecessary, but I would love to go in there and confront Dr. Kappa with this evidence."

"Forget it. If we want to blow the whistle, we *don't* go inside to do it."

"Then how?"

"I think Leanne underestimated the power of K7."

"We have to help the patients," insisted Zoé.

Matt shrugged. "Are they complaining? If you're right, all they're losing is their money. I'm not going to mess around in there to save rich people a few thousand dollars."

"Perhaps they kill them for their money."

"That's absurd, Zoé. They're not dying. You said the clinic has a brilliant recovery record."

"They might be going to kill the Pope."

Matt sighed. "It may not have *been* the Pope in that helicopter."

"Oh come on!" Zoé gave Matt a push, anger in her eyes. "We hear the Pope being mentioned on Ken's little *micro*, and then he comes flying past."

"No, *we* didn't hear anything. *You* thought you heard his name, and *Alain* reckons he saw him. It's all a bit of a long shot."

"But *if* the Pope is definitely inside?" said Zoé.

"We're going back to the village for a coffee," said Matt firmly. "If there's anything on the news tonight about the Pope visiting Tourvillon I might, but only might, go to the local *gendarmerie* about Leanne's death. But I'm *not* going in."

## Chapter 38

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"HOLINESS?"

Stephen Valdieri reached out hesitantly to the bed, touching the sleeping figure in the white satin dressing gown. The Holy Father's eyes opened, making Valdieri jump.

"Is that you, Stephen?"

"Holiness, I have postponed the meeting tomorrow morning with Reverend Mother and Sister Angela. They want you to know that they pray constantly that you will swiftly be restored to full health."

"Everyone is so anxious for my well-being, Stephen." The Pontiff forced a smile as he turned slightly in the bed, and for a moment his legs kicked as though out of control. "I feel considerably more comfortable than I did after the flight, although it was pleasing to be helped to sit upright in time to see Avignon from the air. I can understand why the area attracted the papacy in mediaeval times."

"I believe political pressures provided a greater driving force than a love of French scenery," said Valdieri dryly.

The Holy Father smiled. "Indeed, those were hard times for the Church." He looked down at his legs which had now become still. "Tell me bluntly, Stephen, am I so ill that everyone will be glad to see the back of me?" The twinkle in his eyes outshone the forced upward turn of the pale lips.

"Holiness!" Valdieri was unable to conceal his sense of shock. "You are here because the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon has an envious record of healing."

"Miracles, Stephen? Perhaps I should have taken more time to verify the visions *before* making my way here." The sense of humor seemed to be unimpaired. "I apologize if you found me asleep."

Valdieri checked that the shutters were firmly locked. "A mild sedative has been administered, Holiness. It will soon be dark, and the nursing staff will settle you down for a comfortable night's sleep." The Holy Father would never know, but stationed below the window was an armed guard, with another standing outside the door. SMGs, handguns, and stun grenades.

"Stephen." The Pope raised himself on one elbow and his voice sounded calm as he called. Valdieri went closer to the bed. "Stephen, I want you to know that I feel no fear for what lies ahead."

"I understand, Holiness."

"This clinic is built on holy ground."

"The visions?"

"I feel a great peace in my body. Perhaps it is the centuries of prayer on this hill by the Little Sisters." He pointed to the clinic's brochure on the bedside cabinet. "The Order has suffered much over the years. I do not wish to postpone our meeting with the Sisters."

"But, Holiness, your medical examination has to take priority."

The Pope lay back. The sedative was more than mild. "Stephen, I... I feel so sleepy."

Valdieri bent down to pull the pillow to the back of the bed, allowing the Pontiff's head to rest more comfortably. The involuntary body movements had become more pronounced over the past few days, in spite of the advanced drugs that were now being administered.

"The nurses, Stephen." There was some agitation in the Holy Father's voice. "I do not understand. Why are there no Sisters here in the clinic?"

"It is many years since the Sisters worked here."

The pallid figure in the bed seemed to be making a great effort to regain his concentration. "But the Sisters are close at hand?"

"Very close, Holiness."

"I wish to be nursed by the Sisters, Stephen."

"But, Holiness, Dr. Kappa..."

The voice suddenly became forceful as the Holy Father tried to pull himself upright against his pillow. "Dr. Kappa has put much pressure on the Vatican to get me here. I was led to believe that the Sisters were supportive of my treatment."

"Dr. Kappa is a most able surgeon, Holiness."

The Holy Father's eyes glowed with a sudden energy in spite of the sedative. The words sounded firm and formal. "We are not prepared to discuss the matter further." He gave up the struggle to sit upright and lay back exhausted. "Archbishop Valdieri, you will convey my bidding to Dr. Kappa immediately. I insist that the Sisters attend to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT DRAINED his second cup of coffee in the village bar. He fancied a beer, but drinking with Alain while he was in such a depressed mood would have been a stupid thing to do.

"Those guards have SMGs. It means they're pros." He pushed the large cup and saucer across the table.

"Security work is dangerous," said Zoé. "I do not like guns."

"You don't like me doing *any* sort of security work."

Zoé took hold of his arm. "Is that what you really think?"

"Isn't it what you've been trying to tell me for the past month?"

"I am sorry, Matt. No, I do not have a problem with your work."

Matt took hold of her hand. "Perhaps I don't understand women. I thought you didn't like me working as a backstreet PI."

"If I had to leave you, Matt, would you be upset?"

He laughed. "What's this, a test?"

"I am serious."

She was. He could tell.

"It is my work at the hospital that is upsetting me," she said at last. "I want to get away from there."

Matt looked first at Alain who was staring up at the yellow umbrella, then at Zoé. The colored lights glistened in her tears. He let go of her hand in surprise. "I thought you were happy nursing."

"I like nursing." Zoé pushed her sleeve across her eyes. "It is the hospital I do not like."

"You never said anything."

"You work so hard, Matt, and I did not want you to be worried. I have never been happy since I started working there." She wiped her eyes again. "You must think I am stupid."

"You're not stupid." This wasn't a test, but he had to be careful what he said. "I don't have to work for Ken. We could move." He smiled encouragingly.

"You mean it." It wasn't a question. Just a statement of fact.

"We could come over to live in France if you like."

Zoé's eyes gleamed, a mix of tears and excitement. "You would do that for *me*, Matt?"

"I'd do it for *us*, if it keeps us together."

\* \* \* \* \*

SISTER ANGELA stood in the darkness and peered across the beds of lavender, her attention drawn to the lights in the clinic. She tried to calm herself in the darkness; tried to fight down the frustration.

On the way back from supper she had decided to take a walk and find someone in authority who would listen. For once, she had a bit of freedom. Reverend Mother was too busy talking, and failed to notice that she had not gone to the common room with the other Sisters.

Perhaps she should tell the Archbishop exactly what she had heard. As she stumbled across the rough ground, the cool night air and the brilliant stars recalled memories of her childhood on this hillside. The discipline; the strict discipline. The occasional bouts of truancy, always followed by uncompromising punishment. Could the truly willful ever reform?

She let the lavender heads run through her fingers as she walked towards the bright lights. This aroma would live with her for eternity. The scent of lavender and the discipline of the Convent were inseparable.

Something rose from the long grass, a black figure emerging without a sound to block the path. "Sister, you must go back inside."

She stared, her mind confused by the suddenness of the appearance. The men in the village had once been rough with her, but there was no fear in her mind now. The figure came forward to take her by the arm but quickly drew his hand back. He must be a good man if he did not touch her. She was in the presence of a holy angel, sent to give her help.

"The Holy Father is in great danger," she said.

The angel coughed, a deep cough. "I'm sorry, Sister, the gardens are out of bounds."

"We have to save the Holy Father." She had to communicate her fears to this messenger from God. "You must do something."

"I know, Sister. That's why we're here."

"You know about the threat to his life?" She felt such a sense of relief. Someone was ready to believe her.

"I'm here to take care of him, Sister."

She breathed deeply. "Thank you."

The dark figure gave her comfort. But the world must be a very wicked place if the angels needed to carry guns.

\* \* \* \* \*

FIVE MINUTES later Marcel met Captain Boué beneath the old bell tower that had been designated as their base for the night. Patrol the grounds and report on the radio every ten minutes. It was a strict regime, but a well-proven procedure.

"No wonder they need a special guard here. Some of those Sisters are really loopy." Marcel laughed as he recounted the meeting amongst the lavender.

## Chapter 39

### Tourvillon Village

MATT WAS thinking over Zoé's bombshell. A move to France was not something he'd ever anticipated, but he would stand by his instant response. And he still wondered why he hadn't been more sensitive to Zoé's problems at work. Was he so wrapped up in his own job that he had no time for anyone else's happiness?

He put some money on the table. "Do you really believe Alain saw the Pope?"

Zoé glanced at Alain. "It is possible."

"I know it's possible, but is it likely?"

"Always you will be angry with yourself if you do nothing to find out what happened to Leanne."

"I'll go as far as the wire and work my way round to the gate. Maybe I'll hear someone talking. You and Alain can wait in the car." He nodded towards the

Frenchman who seemed totally spaced out. He could hardly look any worse if they'd been filling him with alcohol all evening. "I'm not going in but we might need a fast getaway. Keep the key in the ignition."

"Be careful, Saint George."

"I don't want to be caught with this." He passed Zoé the telephone pickup for safe keeping. "Let's hope they don't have night vision equipment."

"You make me feel scared. What is this night vision equipment?"

"Things like image intensifiers. They're sort of television cameras with a high-power amplifier. They work in the dark."

"Better than the eyes of a cat?"

"Much better. You can even have them built into binoculars. Have you seen helicopter pilots wearing them in films?"

"I have seen the films with police helicopters chasing criminals at night."

"That's thermal imaging. Infrared. It picks up body heat. You see a white body hiding in someone's back yard or running round the back of a factory. If the guards have either system, they'll pick me out easily."

"Remember, you are not going inside the wire." Zoé put the phone tap in the pocket of her jacket. "And be careful not to touch it. It might be electric."

"Unlikely. This is a hospital, not a military base."

"I had a friend at school who touched the fence of a farmer. I dared her to do it. It was horrible."

"Did she die?"

"Of course not. Farmers do not want to kill their animals, only frighten them. The shock made all her muscles go tight. She hit herself in the face and broke her nose."

"And she never spoke to you again."

"Never, and I have been frightened of electricity ever since."

"Does it matter? I have always been afraid of electricity. It sounds like common sense to me."

"Yes, it *does* matter. There is this nasty sister at work. She was showing us how to use the high voltage defibrillator."

"To get the heart going?"

Zoé nodded. "I did not want to touch it. *Yellow button charges, black button triggers!* She kept shouting it at me, but I could not bring myself to do it because I was afraid of getting an electric shock."

Matt looked down. It was hard not to smile. "This was on a patient?"

"We were practicing on a dummy. That sister is a right old bitch, I can tell you. Every day she is trying to find something wrong."

He leaned over and kissed Zoé on the cheek. "Like I said, you should have told me. Anyway, you're not going back there, and that's for sure."

"I love you," she said quietly. "You are the kindest man I have ever met. I feel better now we have talked about it." She smiled. "I will take a short walk with Alain. I wonder if the black kites are nesting in the rocks. Is there a flashlight in the car?"

"Why?" Perhaps he should have realized the implications of Zoé's question, but in his mind he was already finding a weak spot in the wire. It would be no more

than a game tonight, but in a day or two when the army had gone, he might return and get through the security fence to check the place out.

"Alain may need it," Zoé said lightly.

Alain didn't look as though he needed anything—apart from a long sleep. "He ought to be home," said Matt as he retied his sneakers. If he had to make a run for it, it was vital he had reliable footwear.

"I will drive him home," agreed Zoé reluctantly. "And you will wait until I get back. I want you to keep out of danger."

"I'll wait thirty minutes, then I'm having a look around. Beep the horn to let me know you're back." Matt could feel the uneven cobbles of the old square under his feet. The sneakers gave excellent grip. He was fit and well-practiced at evading hostile punters. If anyone stopped him he was unarmed, an innocent holidaymaker taking a late night walk. But they would have to be good to catch him.

Zoé gave a half-hearted wave. "I do not like it."

\* \* \* \* \*

MAJOR LOUVIERS received the message on his radio. A possible intruder approaching the southwest corner.

A man had been observed on the night vision system five minutes ago. His actions were suspicious simply because they were so normal. He might be a naturalist watching for animal life, but he definitely was not a journalist. A journalist after a spicy story would have been running from cover to cover. This man was walking slowly with a smoothness that was either totally innocent, or a very capable pose.

Louviers watched the grainy shape on the green monitor as the man sat on the grass by the wire and took off a shoe, glancing round with an everyday interest in his surroundings. The image intensifier was so sensitive that even the starlight behind the cloud cover gave sufficient illumination for a useable picture.

"Maximum zoom, Captain." The sitting figure suddenly filled the screen, the shape of the body made up from thousands of green phosphorescent dots that sparkled and flashed in a pulsating rhythm. Captain Boué adjusted the focus but was unable to add more detail to the scene.

"Better get a man down there."

"Already on his way, Major." Boué sounded pleased with himself.

"Anyone else around?"

Captain Boué shook his head. "The thermal imager on the bell tower is on full auto scan. Jacques is running it. All he's found are a couple of foxes, and some rabbits making whoopee. Lucky there are no sheep. A flock of them would cause chaos on our screens."

Louviers continued to study the monitor. He stabbed a finger at the figure crouching beside the high security fence. "Damn the man."

"Relax, Major. We've got this site sewn up." Then Boué laughed. "You'll love this. Marcel found one of the Sisters wandering around the garden. She reckons the Pope's life is in danger. Don't worry, he sent her back indoors. She's harmless. Nothing but *une vieille bonne femme*."

"It's been reported?"



"In the log, Major."

"Good." Every possible piece of data had to be noted. Louviers reached out to the remote control and zoomed the lens to wide angle to reveal Boué's man less than twenty yards from the suspect. The radio on the Captain's shoulder clip beeped quietly just the once. Boué spoke close to the mouthpiece, his voice low. He turned to Louviers. "There's a new suspect on the hill, Major. Jacques says it's all on his infrared. Someone's coming up from the lower road. On foot, near the power lines."

"One of the villagers out for a walk," Louviers said, but he didn't believe it.

"What would happen if they took out the power?" asked Boué.

"The hospital battery supply is instantaneous, and the backup generators start running automatically—within two minutes. Get a man down to the power room, just in case someone's already gained entry. We don't want the place plunged into darkness."

Captain Boué was quickly on his feet. "Shall I warn the team?"

Louviers panned the image intensifier camera slowly across the grounds, but the road from the village was out of sight. "Let's get up the bell tower, Captain." His words were crisp. "We won't sound the alert just yet. I want to look on Jacques' infrared system. He can see all the way down to the village from the tower. There may be more people on his screen by now."

It took no more than a minute for the two GIGN men to run up the winding stairs of the tower, the only tall building left standing by the Nazis. Jacques turned round briefly from his bank of monitors as they entered.

"This one's acting suspiciously." Jacques pointed to the screen. "Climbing the rock by the power cables. Doesn't show up well on the infrared, but it looks like he's got some sort of tool in his hand."

"Sabotage?" Louviers knew he was answering his own question. "I want three men down there, Captain. Now! And, Jacques, you stay here and report immediately if any more subjects appear on the screen."

Jacques turned down the sensitivity. The camera picked up radiated heat from the body, and the clothing now showed as a cooler, dark shade of gray, making the white shape more human. He leaned across to the adjacent monitor and set the times-ten zoom of the adjacent image intensifier camera to frame the shape standing near the top of the rocks.

"Correction. Target is female. And she's using a flashlight."

Louviers touched the infrared camera controls, adjusting the sensitivity to expose a faint image of the ground that was still warm from the heat of the day. It was hard to see detail where the earth and rock were at the same temperature, but anything alive glowed as a clear white outline that was unmistakable.

Louviers pointed to the occasional white blip that flitted jerkily across the screen. "Bats," he muttered. "Ah, the woman's moving now."

Jacques nodded. "She could be going to throw something across the power lines."

Louviers put his radio to his mouth, but paused with his finger on the transmit button. "Our men down there won't be able to see a bloody thing." He pressed the button. "Pierre, send up a paraflare. Sixty second burn time. Fire it towards the

village, elevation eighty degrees. Everyone else, don't look up. Keep your eyes on the ground and detain anyone you see."

The silence was broken by the sound of a small rocket streaking towards the clouds. The stillness returned as quickly as it had been disturbed, while the relentless blue light from the flare threw hard, black shadows across the fields and buildings.

The scene on the infrared monitor in the tower remained unchanged as the thermal imager continued to pick up only the emitted heat, rather than the reflected light from the flare. Something large and white moved slightly above where the woman was standing, flickered unsteadily and quickly moved off the screen.

"A large bird," Boué said briefly.

Louviers watched the figure on the rock sway slightly then lean backwards into the darkness. The scream followed a fraction of a second later, breaking the still night air. The electronic image on the screen had been overtaken by reality.

Louviers grabbed the main communications radio. "Everyone maintain tight vigilance around the site while we recover the body."

"It might be a trap," Boué warned, even though he had witnessed the whole event. No one was going to carry out a stunt like that. "I'll alert the duty doctor."

The body beneath the rock continued to glow brightly on the screen as Jacques panned the infrared camera along the wire. The monitor showed the figure of the man by the wire now standing. Louviers spoke into the radio again.

"Pick him up. Immediately."

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT FELT proud of the way he'd managed to move up to the wire and not be detected. Zoé had returned a few minutes ago; he'd heard her beep the horn as she parked the Mini in the village of Tourvillon. The rocket made him jump and stupidly he looked up at the sky. If there were men hiding in the darkness he was less likely to see them than they were to see him.

The loud shriek that coincided with the flare caused a chill to run down his back. It sounded like a terror-stricken animal in a trap.

Then came the silence. That sound could have been Zoé. Zoé being attacked. Something hit him hard on his back and he fell face down onto the grass.

*"Place your hands on top of your head—now!"*

The voice came from nowhere. Matt began to turn, searching for the figure, but the flare had dazzled him. All he could see was a series of flashing dots imprinted on his eyes.

A foot kicked out and sent him sprawling again onto the dry grass. Then before he could even start to get up, the foot was jammed on his back. He knew that the cold metal on his neck was the tip of a gun barrel.

*"D'accord! D'accord."* The voice had been in French, and Matt replied in the same language. Whoever had him underfoot was an expert. The boot was removed but the gun stayed in place.

*"Sit up slowly, monsieur, hands on your head, and do not turn round."*

Matt obeyed instantly. At that moment the flare died, plunging the hillside into darkness again.

"Your actions are suspicious, monsieur. You will come inside and explain what you are doing here."

Matt became aware of other voices further down the hill, by the high rock where the scream had come from. Men running, shouting. He had the misfortune to be mixed up in a situation. They'd quickly let him go when they found he had no connection with...

That scream. Matt felt his stomach lurch. It had definitely sounded like Zoé.

He turned to his captor. "My girlfriend is in the village. She'll tell you who I am. I came to see where the visions had been."

"Keep your hands on top of your head, monsieur. I am armed and believe me, this gun is not a vision."

The man stood back. After being temporarily blinded by the flare Matt knew that he could never attempt to run. He wondered how long his captor had been watching him by the wire.

The dim shape of clouds broke through the blackness. His eyesight was returning to normal. It might be possible to make a run down the hill, down to the road, and all the way to the village. But why bother?

"I'm on holiday," he explained. "I'm English."

"Turn to your right and start walking."

Matt felt more concerned for Zoé than he did for himself. He could still hear the scream being repeated in his head. He kept his hands high as he set off in front of the armed guard towards the steel entry gates and the security lodge.

\* \* \* \* \*

LOUVIERS WAITED outside the examination room where his men had brought the badly injured female. The nurses were ready, but a doctor was needed before further action could be taken. There were obvious injuries to the woman's legs and arms; but more seriously, she had received a critical head injury.

The telephone rang and the team jumped at the unexpected noise. Louviers looked for someone to answer it, but the two nurses were busy attaching a drip to the woman.

He picked up the phone. "Louviers here... Dr. Kappa? There has been a major accident... The emergency room. I'm there now... I'd appreciate your presence here. Thank you."

He replaced the phone and turned to the wheeled stretcher, the gurney, that held the body of the woman. Perhaps his men had been rather hasty in dragging her up the hill, but all suspicious persons had to be treated as potential terrorists.

"Dr. Kappa is on his way," he explained to the team.

"Increase the oxygen," the nurse shouted to her colleague who was adjusting the valve on the side of the black high-pressure cylinder. "We're putting her on the life support system immediately." She lowered her voice. "I wouldn't give much for her chances."

Louviers watched the nurse punch the intravenous tube into the woman's lower arm. The heart monitor blipped an irregular beat but at least it kept going. Perhaps that was good.

Captain Boué's voice came over the radio. "All's quiet outside the perimeter fence, Major. We have the IR and image intensifiers on three-sixty duty. Apart

from the bats not even a rabbit has poked its nose out. We're monitoring the whole spectrum and have picked up no suspicious transmissions."

"Have you sent anyone down to Tourvillon?"

"Two men have just got back. There's an old English Mini car in the village square. So the suspect is probably telling the truth about his identity."

"Has he said why he was at the wire?"

"He denies trying to get in, but he keeps asking about the woman. We're not letting him near her. He's hysterical. Wants to know if she's his girlfriend."

"And is she?"

"Doubtful. He speaks good French but he's definitely English. The woman was delirious when we picked her up. Muttering away in perfect French."

Louviers turned again to look at the pathetic figure on the stretcher, with a blue plastic tube rammed down her throat so the life support machine could ventilate her lungs. The trace on the pulse oximeter looked faint. She had tubes in her arms and wires stuck all over her chest. The nurse was probably right when she said she wouldn't give much for the woman's chances.

He strode to the door and looked up the corridor. "How much longer is Dr. Kappa going to be?"

## Chapter 40

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"AND WHERE is the... Italian Sister, Stephen?" The Pope's voice faltered but he sounded fully conscious.

"You seem to be better for your short sleep, Holiness."

"Stephen, as an American citizen I had expected you to follow the example of young George Washington and tell the truth."

Valdieri shook his head but could not hide a smile. "If you ever catch me chopping down trees in the Vatican I shall remember what you said."

The Holy Father's sedative had worn off rather quickly, but since he was mentally alert there was no point in glossing over the security implications.

"There was a small problem in the area below the clinic." Valdieri didn't want to make the situation sound over-dramatic. "Some people were walking on the hillside and one of them has been involved in a serious accident."

"A small problem? A serious accident? That sounds rather contradictory. Are you telling me the truth, Archbishop?"

"Holiness!"

The Holy Father took a deep breath. "Do I have to remind you, Stephen, that you must speak with me frankly? I would rather be surrounded by nurses than by soldiers armed to the teeth. However, if there is a danger to our welfare, I can accept the soldiers."

Valdieri noticed the energy in the eyes. It seemed that already the site was having a beneficial effect. Another Lourdes? The possibilities were exciting.

"To be honest, Holiness, there was some initial anxiety, so to be on the safe side we must accept the soldiers for a little longer."

"And the Italian Sister? Allow Sister Angela to come to me, Stephen."

Valdieri was quick to offer an explanation. "Sister Angela is... frail, Holiness. Frail both in body and mind. Of course she wishes to meet with you. Indeed, she is most anxious to do so, but she has received no instruction in nursing."

"The presence of the Italian Sister is all I ask tonight."

"You call her the Italian Sister, Holiness, yet she was born here in Avignon. She learned to speak Italian while working in a Rome hospital as an orderly."

"You do not understand, Stephen." The Pope yawned discretely and seemed surprised that he should have yawned at all. "I wish to talk with the Sister about her time spent in Rome, about happier days when I enjoyed good health."

"It is late, Holiness." Valdieri pointed to the small gilt clock on the shelf to the left of the bed. "The Sisters have retired now. Perhaps in the morning."

"Then I will talk with Dr. Bernetti. I believe the clinic's neurosurgeon is Italian. You have lived in Rome for some time, but you are not a true Italian."

"Is it so obvious?"

"You speak Italian with an American accent."

"I... I didn't realize."

"Take it as a compliment if you like." The Holy Father seemed in remarkably good form. "I have always valued your experience of cosmopolitan living."

"Dr. Kappa insists on attending to you personally, however. Dr. Kappa has achieved the most amazing results in advanced surgical techniques."

"You mean his patients remain alive?"

Valdieri laughed. "They certainly live long enough to sing his praises."

The Pope lay back against his high pillow. "Then I look forward to meeting him in the morning. But I would like to see Dr. Bernetti tonight."

"Holiness, it is not possible." Valdieri tried to sound both firm and sympathetic. It would be better to change the subject. "The College of Cardinals send their best wishes. The official announcement of your visit here will not be made for some days. Your privacy is guaranteed."

The slight shrug of the Holy Father's shoulders was probably a comment on the cardinals' own desire for privacy. He had often said that news of ill health, anyone's ill health, ought to be a matter for sharing within the Church for prayer.

"In your view, Stephen, is Dr. Kappa a good man?"

"Yes... indeed." Valdieri could have kicked himself for allowing the slight hesitation. "A good man, Holiness."

"But?"

"I do not think there are any buts. I am sure he is the best man to attend to your condition."

"That is reassuring." That was it. No further questions on the man who would hold the Holy Father's life in his hands. But the hesitation would be stored away, perhaps to cause unnecessary anxiety when there ought to be complete trust in the healer. Valdieri clenched his fists. Absolute trust? Absolute trust in a senior member of the Knights of the Holy Succession? Complete trust in the enemy?

The Holy Father looked up suddenly. "And the people on the hillside tonight?"

"I do not understand, Holiness."

"One has met with a serious accident, you say? The operating facilities are certain to be needed."

"Holiness, nothing will stand in the way of your needs."

The Pope struggled to sit upright again. "You do not understand me, Stephen. I cannot possibly receive priority."

"Holiness!" Valdieri shook his head slowly. "The woman has received a severe head injury, as well as superficial wounds to her arms and legs. There will be emergency surgery tonight, but it is most unlikely the operating facilities will still be required for her tomorrow. Dr. Kappa is not expecting the patient to survive."

\* \* \* \* \*

LOUVIERS ALLOWED Matt to go to the emergency room to confirm Zoé's identity. The guard who accompanied him held him back in the doorway, but it was close enough to see Zoé with tubes running from her side and arm to various bags. Between the dressings he could make out the white scalp where they had shaved her head. He ran forward before the guard could stop him. "You're going to get better," he whispered as he leaned over the inert body and kissed Zoé's forehead. "I love you."

She lay without moving.

He began to cry. "Zoé, I'll help you find another job where you'll be happy. Will you marry me?" It was a crazy reaction, but deep down he knew he meant it. It was a question he should have asked months ago.

For a moment it seemed that she stirred, but maybe it was his imagination.

"Mr. Rider?"

He turned to see a man wearing a bloodstained green gown removing his surgical gloves.

"I'm Dr. Kappa." The man put out a hand, then withdrew it quickly. "Didn't we meet earlier today in Mr. Clarkson's office?"

Matt was glad not to be shaking hands. He'd not expected this man to be involved with Zoé. "I came with Alain Corbin," he said quietly.

Kappa nodded as though understanding something that had been bothering him. "And the patient is the woman who was with you?"

Matt nodded.

"Yes, it makes sense now. And you claim she's your girlfriend?"

"She's Zoé Champanelle. Yes, she's my girlfriend, and we're going to get married."

"Perhaps." Kappa rubbed his chin. "Yes, for the moment let's say you know each other." He pulled Matt into the outer room. "Please, Mr. Rider, it is urgent that we speak in private."

Matt wavered. Somehow he had to keep Kappa away from Zoé. Suddenly his inner thoughts exploded. "I want my girlfriend moved to a hospital in Avignon!"

Kappa looked surprised. "We have the best facilities here, Mr. Rider. The very best."

"I want her *moved*."

"The patient is in no condition to go anywhere. I have instructed my staff to carry out a PET scan and..."

"What's that?" Matt asked sharply.

"PET? Positron Emission Tomography. We inject the brain with a radioactive solution and use a scanner to build up a three dimensional image of the brain. Believe me, any damage will be immediately evident."

"Brain damage?" Matt looked at Zoé lying deathly still on the stretcher.

"Mr. Rider, this woman fell from a considerable height onto hard ground. I have already relieved some pressure under the fracture on the side of her head, and reduced the internal bleeding. My team will now carry out further tests."

"But not an operation?"

Kappa looked Matt directly in the eyes. "I intend to operate as soon as this woman has been stabilized."

"Don't you need a consent form?"

"Can you get someone from her family here within the hour?"

"Zoé's parents are on holiday in Italy. You needn't think I'm going to sign anything."

"Unless you are related, your signature would be worthless. The patient comes under my control now."

"No!"

Kappa looked astonished at the response. "Mr. Rider, you're in shock. I intend to have you injected with a harmless sedative."

"Not a sedative!" Matt stood with his back against the wall.

"You're getting in my way, Mr. Rider."

Matt looked around, his mind in confusion. Through the open door Zoé lay on the trolley connected to tubes while two nurses attended to her drips and oxygen supply. Kappa stood silently in his bloodstained gown. The room seemed unreal.

"Mr. Rider?" Kappa closed the door to the recovery room.

Matt ignored the surgeon. Kappa must know who had planted the bugs. He'd seen Zoé messing with the computer. Kappa's priority must be to protect K7.

Alain Corbin might be able to help, but Alain was asleep at his home.

The Mother Superior would never be part of a plot to kill anyone, and she might even be nursing the Pope at this moment. He marched forward and pushed open the door to the recovery room.

"I want to see the Pope." It was an outrageous statement. The two nurses by Zoé's side looked up quickly.

"You don't know what you've just said." Kappa came forward and gripped his shoulder. "You claim this woman is your girlfriend. I think you're afraid she'll tell us about your plans if she recovers. The GIGN were right, you *are* terrorists." Kappa pushed Matt against the wall and called one of the guards.

Matt struggled to get one last glimpse of Zoé on the life-support trolley.

A PET scan? Was there really such a thing?

If this was a holy site he could try calling for a priest. Perhaps a sympathetic man of God would take a message to the outside world. The window was slightly open. He let his legs drop from under him. The sudden movement surprised the guard and he released his hold.

Matt rolled away and jumped to his feet. Before the guard could reach him he pushed the window wide and yelled into the darkness of the Tourvillon countryside.

"A priest! I want to see a priest!"

\* \* \* \* \*

SISTER ANGELA heard a man cry out. There had been such comings and goings in the grounds. Soldiers running backwards and forwards in the darkness, but these soldiers were angels, good men. They were not like the enemy who had come to Tourvillon in the war, come to hurt and destroy.

"Sister Angela, you must go back to bed. Straight away, please."

She turned to see the Mother Superior standing in the pool of light that shone from the hallway. All around her the other Sisters lay in their makeshift beds, sleeping under the thin sheets.

"Yes, Reverend Mother." Obedience was an important element of religious life, but sometimes it was difficult to do the bidding of a younger woman. First Tourvillon, then Rome, and back to Tourvillon. Life was hard and the discipline strict. "I only wanted to see the angels in the garden."

"There are no angels, Sister Angela."

"You are wrong, Reverend Mother. They are here to guard the Holy Father."

Sister Angela returned to her temporary bed. A sudden thought excited her. As a teenager she used to roam through the gardens late at night, before she was admitted to the Order as a Sister. Those were times when she visited the village secretly.

Tonight she would go for a walk, speak to the soldiers, and find out what the commotion was about. Perhaps she would even see the Pope in his room. What would the Holy Father be doing? Reading? Writing? Maybe... She felt herself blush. No Sister should allow such thoughts to enter her mind, but she must warn the Holy Father of what she had heard.

She slid from her bed and put on her white habit, then made her way carefully between the sleeping Sisters to the window, feeling for the security of the rosary at her side. The garden of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon was always an exciting place after dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT LOOKED at Major Louviers of the GIGN, trying to sum him up as a possible ally. He tried to see everyone here as a possible ally, but everyone failed to come up to expectations.

"Tell me what you were trying to achieve, Monsieur Rider."

What could he say? That he wanted to investigate Leanne Corbin's death? That the Knights of the Holy Succession were totally corrupt? That Dr. Kappa wanted to kill Zoé?

"I need your help, Major Louviers."

"Then help me first, monsieur. We were watching you on our night vision systems. We saw you crouching by the wire. We saw the woman climb the rock by the electricity line. She was going to interfere with the wires. It is all on tape. Tell me why she did it."

Suddenly he knew. "The black kites! She wanted to see them close up."

Louviers held out a black plastic box with two wires. He said nothing.

Matt nodded. "I told Zoé to put it in the car. She wasn't going to use it."

Louviers threw the phone bug onto the table. "And the other devices we found?"

"Only two," said Matt. "I think the batteries were no good. It was... a sort of joke."



"A joke, monsieur?"

"I am a..." Should he say what he did for a living? No, not yet. "I'm English."

"You speak good French."

"My girlfriend is French."

"And you decided to bug the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon with *les micros* that do not work? I think you have come to harm the Holy Father."

"I want to see a priest."

"There are no priests."

"Where is Alain Corbin?"

"Alain Corbin? Ah yes, it is all a mystery. A nurse dies, and within two days her husband is up here with an English couple trying to bug the clinic that treated her."

Matt made up his mind. This man would hear him out. "Major Louviers, I have good reason to..."

A GIGN man opened the door. "We've picked up that batty Sister Angela in the grounds again."

"Then tuck her back in bed, Jacques."

The man hesitated as though taking the instruction literally. "I'm not sure I should do that, Major."

"Then let the Mother Superior do it."

"No, Major, there's something else. She still insists the Holy Father's life is in danger."

"She's nothing but a nuisance." Louviers sounded irate. "Make sure they lock her in her room. That's all." The dismissal was brisk. Matt watched Louviers turn back to him. "You were going to say something, monsieur."

Matt sat forward in the chair and rested his head in his hands. Sister Angela knew this place was corrupt, and they thought she was crazy. What notice would they take of him? "Zoé isn't just a girlfriend—I've asked her to marry me."

"Dr. Kappa is giving the woman some sort of brain scan." Major Louviers hardly sounded interested.

Matt was on his feet. "He wants to kill her." He was too angry to care what he said. "Dr. Kappa killed Leanne Corbin. He even wants to kill the Pope. You've got to stop him."

"You think so?" Louviers thought for a moment then reached for the phone and dialed the operating room. He turned to Matt. "I'm going to put a stop to this."

Matt breathed out heavily. At last someone was listening. Pray God they were in time.

"Dr. Kappa?" Louviers glanced at Matt. "Monsieur Rider is still with me. He's in an extremely agitated state and I'm not going to get anything sensible out of him tonight. I'm worried for his health... You've already arranged for a sedative? What sort of sedative?" He nodded. "Yes, that sounds like an excellent idea. The sooner he's out of the way the better."

A nurse came into the room and stood waiting for instructions.

Louviers flicked his fingers at Matt. "You try to break into this site, and by your own admission you know the Pope is here. Hardly the actions of an innocent man, monsieur."

Matt sat down again. "I want to see my girlfriend and I want to see a priest."

"Keep quiet." Louviers sounded as though his patience was exhausted. "Roll up your sleeve."

Jokes about Masonic rituals seemed remarkably inappropriate. As Matt struggled, he realized the nurse was Mazie Meyran, Leanne's friend from New Mexico, they had met briefly at Alain Corbin's house. She didn't return any sign of acknowledgement.

She held the syringe with the tip of the needle pointing upwards. "It's only a sedative, Mr. Rider, prescribed by Dr. Kappa."

"How's Zoé?" There was no sign of recognition.

"You mean the woman who had the accident? Dr. Kappa will be operating on her again soon."

"She's my girlfriend," said Matt. "You know she is." He began to get to his feet. "I have to see her. Dr. Kappa killed Leanne Corbin. Now he's going to kill Zoé."

Just for a moment Matt thought he detected something approaching humanity in Mazie's eyes. Then she said, "I have to do this."

And he fought, frantic, determined not to get injected. The armed guard put a knee in his chest and ripped at his sleeve until he'd exposed the whole upper arm. Matt watched Mazie lean forward. She pressed down with her whole body as she raised the syringe and brought the needle against his arm.

There was no sensation of the needle breaking the skin. No sensation at all.

## Chapter 41

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

ARCHBISHOP VALDIERI folded the daily paper carefully so as not to disturb the Pope where he lay in the large bed, partly covered by a white linen sheet. Even when asleep the tiredness around the Holy Father's eyes was distressing. Over the past few weeks the Pontiff had gone from reasonable health to near death. He was still insisting he wanted to see the Italian Sister. The look on the normally vibrant face was too painful for any of the Sisters to witness. Idle chatter among the women might get to the outside world.

The Holy Father's New Testament with the white leather binding lay on the large walnut table. It would be more appropriate on the bedside cabinet. As he walked softly over the smooth carpet, Valdieri listened. There had been a disturbance a few minutes ago from one of the floors below. There were other patients in the clinic of course, especially as this visit had been arranged so hurriedly, but surely a little more respect was called for.

Outside in the corridor he heard unexpectedly loud voices. The guard should make sure that noise was kept to a minimum. Was it too much to hope that the clinic had ceased to function for the night? Someone knocked on the door, a discreet knock. Folding the Holy Father's reading glasses and placing them in the blue leather case, Valdieri finished tidying the personal items on the cabinet before going to the door.

"Your Excellency." One of the nurses, an American, stood there with a medicine trolley. "Your Excellency, I have to check on the patient."

The patient. It seemed such an unfriendly term. For security reasons, the staff were required to play a game of not using a personal title for the Holy Father. He nodded to the guard standing by the side of the door, who moved to one side to allow the nurse and trolley to pass.

The nurse seemed anxious. It was not until the door was closed that she left her trolley of medicines and measures. "I'm Nurse Meyran, Your Excellency." She bowed respectfully as she spoke. "I'm worried for the safety of the visitor." She glanced towards the bed and crossed herself as she did so.

"Attend to the patient, nurse. You must not allow reverence to stand in the way of professional duty."

"I have to talk to you, Your Excellency. The Holy Father's life is in danger."

Valdieri found his mind racing ahead. Just mentioning the identity of the Holy Father was a violation of common sense, but there was more to it than that. Much more. The nurse's warning came as a premonition.

"You must not burden yourself with the patient's health, nurse. Just dispense whatever medicine is on the list."

"A nurse died here a few days ago, Your Excellency."

Valdieri shook his head, aware of how lightly the Holy Father slept. He raised a finger to his lips.

"It was my friend who died, Your Excellency." Nurse Meyran held onto her trolley of medicines and began to shake. "Two of her friends have been trying to investigate her death." She paused in an attempt to regain her composure. "One of them is downstairs in intensive care, and I'm not sure I can trust Dr. Kappa." Then she began to cry loudly.

As Valdieri led her to the window he noticed the Holy Father turn in his bed. "You must be careful what you say, Nurse Meyran. Dr. Kappa is a most respected surgeon. This clinic is most highly regarded."

"Dr. Kappa told me to inject the Englishman with a sedative."

Valdieri looked at the trolley of pills and liquids. The nurse seemed in need of a sedative herself. "Don't you think Dr. Kappa knows best?"

"The Englishman believes Dr. Kappa killed my friend Leanne in intensive care." She hesitated as she put a small hanky to her mouth. "It's a dreadful thing to say."

"Dreadful. But you must take no notice. The Englishman must be greatly confused."

"But he says the Holy Father is in danger."

Again the panic shot through Valdieri. But this was only foolish babbling, like the childish words of Sister Angela. "You see, the man is confused. That will be why Dr. Kappa prescribed the sedative. In the meantime, I shall pray for the woman."

He noticed another movement from the bed. The Holy Father was starting to wake.

The nurse returned to the trolley. With trembling hands she attempted to pour a measure of pale pink liquid into a small glass, but it spilled over the side. "I didn't give the injection. I just pretended."

Valdieri put his hand out to take the medicine glass. The nurse's behavior was bizarre. She might easily have picked up the wrong bottle for the Holy Father, or be dispensing too much medication. He moved to the phone on the walnut table.

"Please wait here, Nurse Meyran." Valdieri held the glass to the light. "I need to check the prescription with Dr. Kappa." He smiled hesitantly. "Just to be on the safe side."

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT LAY on the small couch, conscious of the presence of Major Louviers. He seemed to be conscious of everything—especially the lack of sensation from the needle in his arm.

He tried not to move, or he would alert Louviers. His reactions seemed to be heightened, probably more by fear than anything the nurse had done. The Major had been speaking on the radio and now got up to leave the room, instructing the guard to stand on duty outside the door.

"Lock it," said Louviers as he went out. "The man is asleep, but he may have inside help. Lock the door and stay alert."

Matt raised his head warily, saw he was alone, and slipped his feet over the side of the couch. Imagination was a powerful force and it would be easy to think that his head was light and his legs unsteady. But at least he was standing. He touched his arm where the nurse had plunged the hypodermic, and he felt no soreness, just a sense of wet skin. The window was closed but not locked. Louviers must have a lot of faith in the nursing staff's ability to give an injection. Mazie Meyran had let him go free. Mazie and Leanne had been good friends, so it seemed that he and Zoé weren't alone in finding the sudden fatality suspicious. He had to get to the Mother Superior. He banged his hand against the window in frustration.

The window opened slightly.

Fresh air, cool evening air of Provence, blew in through the gap. He was two floors up. A small ledge ran below the window towards the corner of the building. The thick creeper in the corner would be easy to climb down—if he could get that far. The building was white. He looked down at his dark clothing. Out there, clinging to the wall, he'd make an easy target.

The ledge was probably wide enough for a toehold. If Mazie had given a shot of something with a delayed action, the sooner he was down at ground level the better. He put both legs outside and felt cautiously for the ledge with his feet. It was just within reach. He held tightly to the frame as he lowered himself.

No sound came from the gardens. The next sill was too far away to grab without letting go of his own window frame. There would have to be a fraction of a second, just a brief instant, when he let go, keeping flat against the wall while reaching for the next handhold.

He didn't want to think about it for too long. He made sure his feet were steady, pressed his stomach to the wall... and released his hold. As his balance became unsteady, the next sill was there. Two more windows and he would be at the corner, ready for the creeper.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE NURSE watched Dr. Kappa study the computer printouts from the PET scan, the colored outlines showing sections of the brain. He turned to her. "Check the saline drip. It seems rather slow."

"Shall I get Dr. Bernetti?" she asked.

Dr. Kappa sounded angry. "What the hell do I need Mario Bernetti for? I'm doing this one on my own."

She turned away from the saline drip and went towards the door. Dr. Kappa's attitude surprised her. Perhaps it was having the Pope on site that made everyone edgy. The famous "patient". Did the management really think the staff wouldn't find out who he was?

"Nurse! Where the hell are you going?"

"Sorry, Dr. Kappa." She returned to the drip.

"I'm taking a break. Tell Major Louviers I want one of his men outside the operating room to make sure that no one, and that includes Mario Bernetti, comes in to disturb me. And make sure that drip's working properly."

She felt herself going bright red at the suggestion of incompetence. Dr. Bernetti would have been a wiser choice for a major operation on a brain injury. For some reason, Dr. Kappa was desperate to do this one on his own.

She bit her lip. Professional jealousy was horrid when it stood in the way of healing.

## Chapter 42

### Convent of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

CLIMBING DOWN the creeper had been the easy part. Matt realized he now had to find a way to invade the nunnery. Even if he could get to the Mother Superior she might not be any help. A visit to the Convent could be a waste of vital minutes, and finding the way across a strange garden guarded by security forces was not part of his police training. It was probably impossible, and the bitch of it was he could think of no other way to save Zoé.

At the corner of the building he stopped and listened. A guard might be doing the same, waiting for a movement, but somehow it seemed unlikely. The security forces would surely be close to the perimeter fence. They wouldn't have let him get this far if they'd been watching. He'd made an easy target while getting ready to drop to the ground.

Laser sights, that's what they used! He looked down, almost expecting to see a bright red dot crawling across his shirt, searching for his heart.

If the guards had hi-tech vision systems, an infrared imager would pick him out as a glowing shape. But if he wanted to help Zoé he'd have to take the risk. Maybe get caught—or shot.

Slowly he edged his way into the rows of lavender to crawl on hands and knees to the building where Sister Angela would no doubt be fast asleep. The soil felt dry and gritty, but there was sufficient room to allow good progress. Within five

minutes he emerged from the shelter of the plants. No one had challenged him. The site seemed deserted. The perimeter protection must be so good that the GIGN were confident they could detect intruders before they attempted entry.

His confidence was growing by the minute. He stood up and walked to the heavy wooden door of the Convent. It was locked. He should have anticipated such an obvious barrier to finding the Mother Superior. There had been enough fuss over opening the door in daylight. After dark probably the Pope would be refused entry, even with a ticket signed by Saint Peter.

A woman's voice from the small stone building opposite made him jump.

"Monsieur."

He turned and saw Sister Angela looking down at him from a window at head level. He put a finger to his lips. A raised voice in the stillness of the night would bring goodness knows who.

"Monsieur, the Pope is in great danger. I believe now that the Lady gave me a warning about the Holy Father. She wanted me to save his life. Why else am I still here?"

Matt stood close to the window and spoke softly. "Tell me what you know."

"I know there are bad people here, monsieur."

This was getting nowhere. He raised his voice from a whisper. "Do you remember me? My girlfriend spoke to you two days ago. We came to your room with Leanne Corbin's husband." It was as well to be sure; the nun didn't seem too bright.

"Of course I remember."

"Then you have to help me. I want to see your Mother Superior."

"Please," she said. "You must learn to say please."

What a time for a lesson in manners. "You have to help me. Please."

"I will come out to talk with you, monsieur." Sister Angela looked back into the room. "The other Sisters are asleep. Be ready to catch hold of my feet, monsieur."

To be caught helping a nun climb from a convent window in her underwear must be some sort of heinous crime in any country, maybe especially so in France. "You have to be quiet," he warned. It was all he could think to say.

Relieved to discover that the Sister was fully dressed in her white habit, he caught hold of the small black shoes as the feet came through the opening. Gently he lowered Sister Angela to the ground. She weighed so little.

"*Merci, monsieur.*"

"Can you wake the Mother Superior for me?"

"There are soldiers around here, monsieur. Good soldiers. Angels. They have come to guard our important visitor."

Matt could imagine her facial expression. In the light her eyes would surely be sparkling like a child's.

"The Holy Father has come from Rome to see us, monsieur. Isn't it wonderful?"

It would be even more wonderful if this Sister could do something practical. "Why did you say the Pope is in danger?"

"The surgeon is not to be trusted, monsieur."

"So what did you hear, Sister? Someone talking?"

"Sometimes I manage to get to the clinic to talk to the patients. You are a good man, monsieur, and I will tell you. I heard the surgeon talking on the phone. He said that the Holy Father is investigating his secrets."

"And you listened?"

"I... I could not help it. He was speaking in his own language."

"Have you heard of the Knights of the Holy Succession?"

There was a pause. "They do good work, monsieur. Good work here at the clinic."

"But you think someone wants to kill the Pope?"

Again a prolonged silence. "I heard the surgeon say he is prepared to kill the Holy Father, to halt an investigation." Sister Angela seemed to be talking to herself. She turned to Matt and caught his arm in a fierce grip. "We must stop him!"

"I'm with you there—he's going to kill my girlfriend. Can we trust the Mother Superior?"

"Ah, monsieur, Mother Superior can be very cross with me, so we will not wake her. But I think Archbishop Valdieri is a kind man."

"An Archbishop?"

"He is staying here in the clinic. He has come from Rome."

"Can we see him?"

"Perhaps, but he may not believe what I have to say. People have not always believed me."

Matt stood back slightly but the grip on his arm increased. Great. People didn't believe anything this old nun said. In fact they'd never believed her: not since 1934. This old Sister was probably well-known in Tourvillon for being a pathological liar. It was going to one hell of a night.

"Is there a telephone? A private phone?"

"There is the telephone the nurses use for their personal calls. I do not know much about the telephone system, but I believe you need something called a *télécarte*."

"I have one. Where is the phone?"

"In the hallway outside the nurses' day room. We must go carefully, monsieur. There are soldiers keeping guard, but not here. I know where they are hiding." Sister Angela must surely be smiling. "I have been walking around in the dark. The soldiers they talk to me, but they do not think I will remember where they are. *Regardez*, monsieur, you see the old bell tower?"

He could see the outline against the lights from the clinic.

"There are two men in there, monsieur. They have special radios and televisions. There is another man, just the other side of that wall, keeping watch on the little gateway through to the clinic. We will not go that way, I think."

"I don't think so, either." Perhaps this woman did have something useful to contribute. She'd already taken the part of a good surveillance operative, checking out the opposition while pretending to be an innocent passer-by. "You go in front and lead the way, Sister Angela." He hesitated. "Please."

The phone on the wall was exactly as the Sister had described. A direct line to the outside world taking a standard French phone card. Matt could see a light in the nurses' day room but could hear no one inside. Ken was at home. He sounded

surprised to hear Matt. "Isn't it a bit late for a friendly phone call? Are you in trouble, kiddo?"

"This has to be a quick one, Ken. Have you found what's on those CDs?"

"You enjoying yourselves down there in France?"

"Ken, you're wasting time. What's on those discs?"

Ken seemed to catch on to the need for haste. "I had my work cut out, I can tell you."

"You've played them?"

"They wouldn't work on the office PC. Some sort of encryption. I took them to Mac the Hack at the cyber café in Queens Street. He cracked the code in a couple of hours. Oh, and you're paying for his time."

"Just tell me what's on them."

"I can't think why the hell you wanted to send them to me. You think I'm interested in religious art?"

Matt turned to Sister Angela who was looking anxiously down the corridor. She tugged furiously at his arm. "Someone is coming, monsieur." She sounded like a guilty child.

"Tell me the truth, Ken."

"We must go now, monsieur."

"What are they, Ken?"

Sister Angela began to pull more strongly at Matt's arm as he tried to listen to Ken.

"Does the name Smolensk mean anything to you? The Communists stripped a monastery in Smolensk of its icons in 1918. Mac did an Internet search. Priceless Russian icons going back to the twelfth century."

"Priceless?"

"Only they're not priceless anymore. Those CDs are an illustrated catalogue of the whole Smolensk collection. I don't know how he did it, but Mark says there are details and prices encrypted into each picture."

"And he's cracked the encryption?"

"All of it. Those prices are big money. hundreds of thousands of US dollars for each one. What the hell are you up to over there, kiddo?"

Matt replaced the phone. The footsteps sounded closer. Stolen Russian icons worth millions. And Leanne Corbin had stumbled on the evidence in a large envelope. Now he knew why Dr. Kappa had killed her.

## **Chapter 43**

### **Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon**

ARCHBISHOP VALDIERI closed the door softly as he left the Holy Father's room and stood for a moment in the carpeted corridor. The GIGN man, submachine gun in his hands, watched him before turning discreetly to face the front. The security was excellent.



He sniffed. The smell of that special antiseptic that was unique to hospitals hung in the air. It had spoiled his sleep last night. Even expensive carpets could do nothing to disguise the fact that people came here filled with torment, scared for the future. He could thank God that so many patients left with their full health restored.

The Holy Father seemed so much more at rest, both physically and mentally. There had been an angry exchange of voices in the corridor leading to the executive offices, but the sedative had done its work. The Pontiff was asleep at last—in France.

So many investigations to be made concerning the operation of this clinic. He recalled the conversation with the diplomat in the New York confessional while he was still a priest. A penitent riddled with guilt, unable to surrender the treasure he had stolen from the Russian people, choosing worldly goods to absolution. And now the items were surfacing in the hands of private collectors. Evidence pointed here, but in spite of his impatience the search for the Smolensk icons would have to wait a few more days. His primary objective was the Holy Father's return to full health. A miracle was needed. Perhaps Tourvillon was the place where God would supply it.

"Your Excellency."

Nurse Mazie Meyran walked softly towards him from the large stairway. A pang of conscience nipped at his body. The pink medication had been exactly as prescribed.

"Goodnight, nurse. And I'm sorry." Being in charge of the Holy Father's safety meant offending the innocent from time to time.

She was not just passing by. "I have to talk, Your Excellency. What I said to you earlier is true. Nurse Leanne Corbin really did believe that one of the surgeons was doing something terribly wrong here at the clinic."

"What exactly?" He deliberately made the question sound censorious. This was not the time for hearing gossip. He was about to make his way to his own room in the corridor below the Holy Father's quarters.

"I have something important to tell you, Your Excellency. Can I walk with you to your room?"

"It would not be fitting to ask you into my room." He coughed to hide his embarrassment. "Perhaps we could talk out here in the corridor."

She looked around anxiously. "Your Excellency, Leanne Corbin was not the only nurse to feel uneasy about the work here. The successes are marvelous, of course, but there are times when the patient is..." She opened her hands in a display of anguish. "I told Leanne she was talking nonsense. But now she is dead and I find myself asking why. Why, Your Excellency, why did she die so suddenly?"

"We must all be prepared for the imminence of death, my child."

"She was not seriously ill. I know it."

"But the inquest..."

"There was no inquest. Dr. Kappa said it was unnecessary."

Valdieri felt decidedly uncomfortable. "With all due respect, you are a nurse, and Dr. Kappa is a most brilliant surgeon. I think he might claim with good reason to be able to make a better assessment than you of the cause of someone's death."

"You don't understand, Your Excellency." Nurse Meyran turned her head towards the far end of the corridor. "Dr. Bernetti is angry. He wants to do the operation on the Holy Father, but Dr. Kappa says he will do it himself. Something is not right."

"Thank you, nurse, I think you should be going now." Enough foolish words had been exchanged this evening. "I will have a word with Dr. Bernetti and find out if he shares your worries." He smiled, an inadequate attempt to instill confidence. "I am a security supervisor, trained to look for suspicious actions, but I am sure I shall find nothing wrong here."

The nurse tried to return the smile through her tears. "Thank you, Your Excellency. I expect I have said too much."

Valdieri watched her run down the stairs, her white uniform clinging to her body. Yes, she had said far too much. Nevertheless, her words were an echo of his own misgivings. Something was not right at Tourvillon. He should have listened more closely to Sister Angela. The elderly nun knew something significant.

## Chapter 44

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE NURSE was not even out of sight before the sound of heated voices finished with the slam of a door. Bernetti strode up the corridor, his walk indicating a man who had been affronted. When he saw Valdieri standing outside the Pope's room his voice burst into fluent Italian.

"I know Jim Kappa is in charge of this clinic, Your Excellency, but he's mistaken regarding the preliminary diagnosis on the Holy Father. The tests are positive as far as I'm concerned. The central nervous system may well be showing the symptoms, but I know the part of the brain that is triggering the responses."

"Slow down, Mario." Valdieri put an arm out to prevent Bernetti from pushing his way into where the Pope was asleep. The surgeon seemed to prefer speaking Italian, and he did the same. "We can talk in my room below, but I'm afraid your views aren't making much sense to a non-medical man."

Bernetti again moved to the closed door to the Papal apartment, where the guard was keeping unauthorized staff away from the patient. "Let me in and I will show you. A simple reaction test will convince even a layman."

Valdieri shook his head. "I will make us some coffee and we can have a talk. There is an ingenious espresso machine in my room." As they walked down the brown carpeted corridor, Valdieri noticed the pictures lining the walls; French and Italian nineteenth century pastoral scenes, a period of art he had once studied. He paused at four outstanding watercolors in a panel, removed his glasses and peered closely. One looked remarkably like a Corot. The idea of valuable originals being on show was unthinkable. He could see now that these were first class copies. They were, perhaps, an indication of everything here not being as genuine as it first appeared.

"Jim Kappa is a fool, Your Excellency."

Valdieri turned to Bernetti, replaced his glasses and continued to lead the way. "You can hardly expect me to adjudicate on a difference of medical opinion, Mario."

"Jim Kappa's diagnosis is wrong."

"Do I detect a professional animosity?"

"Certainly not."

"The world has given us ranks, Mario: yours in medicine and mine in religious duties." He paused outside the door to his room, conscious again of that slight but repugnant smell of antiseptic in the air. "The Holy Father has agreed to put his life in the hands of the medical staff at Tourvillon. To that end I have looked at all staff. I have, you might say, been finding evidence of a nonmedical nature. Some of it has not been pleasant."

Bernetti made a tutting noise. "Your Excellency, you must have discovered who is behind the running of this clinic."

"I know where the money goes."

"Then are you happy to put the life of the Holy Father into the hands of a secret society?"

Valdieri went to his table and tore open a new pack of ground coffee. The water in the percolator was already heating up. "Surely Masonic Lodges are renowned for their good works."

Bernetti came close. "The Holy Father is opposed to secret societies such as the Knights. Are you here on his behalf to destroy them?"

"I cannot comment." Valdieri carefully measured four heaped spoonfuls of ground coffee into the machine from which steam was already hissing gently. "I am more concerned for the Holy Father's immediate future. I expect you know there is a young woman downstairs on a life support system."

"Jim is treating her, Your Excellency." Bernetti shrugged as though it was of no importance.

"Major Louviers found a telephone bug in her jacket. They picked up a man close to the security fence. The man says they were both out for an innocent walk."

Bernetti shrugged again, a prolonged Latin action. "You think they were trying to get to the Holy Father?"

"I don't know." Valdieri sighed. That was the problem, he knew so little. He pulled the handle on the side of the small machine and brown liquid rushed into the two cups. "It might be prudent if you were to keep an eye on the woman, Mario."

"If Jim Kappa wants my help with the woman, he can ask." Bernetti stirred his coffee briskly. "My only concern is the correct treatment for the Holy Father."

Valdieri put his coffee on the table and walked to the window. The glow from the bulbs outside the bar in the square at Tourvillon village looked inviting. "Maybe you should tell me what is on your mind."

Bernetti seemed thoughtful for a moment. "The Holy Father's problem originates in the brain, regardless of the results from Jim's tests. I know it does, and *Jim* knows it does, but he won't admit it. The Holy Father cannot survive two surgical

attempts at correct treatment. Only one of us can be right in this matter. Do I make myself clear?"

Valdieri returned to his coffee. "I need time to think, Mario. By the time Professor Rossano and Dr. Bisenti recover, it will be too late for us to get the benefit of their experience."

"But that is not why you have come here to Tourvillon," Bernetti said suddenly. "You say you have been finding evidence? Evidence of what?"

There would never be a perfect time, but this looked like a good opportunity to discuss the investigation that had drawn him to Avignon.

"Sit down, Mario."

\* \* \* \* \*

"WHERE NOW, monsieur?" Sister Angela seemed to be enjoying her diversion from institutional life.

Matt was conscious of the minutes ticking down to Zoé's operation. "Take me to the Archbishop."

"But I do not know where Archbishop Valdieri is staying in the clinic, monsieur."

Matt glanced at the elderly nun. The original surviving resident, and she hadn't a clue how to find anybody. Knowing where to find the phone must have been a minor miracle in itself. "Whatever happens, try not to look guilty." As he said it he realized it was an impertinent instruction to give a saintly nun. "If you see what I mean, Sister Angela."

She just nodded, laughter in her small eyes.

"Keep close to me and let me do the talking. Please," Matt added.

"Yes, monsieur. We will go up to where the guests stay. I think perhaps I do know where Archbishop Valdieri will be."

In the main building, Sister Angelo pointed to a door that had light coming from under it. Matt knocked. If they'd got it wrong, he and Zoé could end up in the operating room side by side.

A tall, silver haired man opened the door. He had thick lips and a large nose, not at all like anyone she knew. But he looked important. Sister Angela bowed her head and almost did a curtsy. It wasn't the Pope, so this cleric with the lined face must be Archbishop Valdieri.

Matt looked down the corridor each way, before pushing himself gently forward. He spoke to the man in French. "My name is Matt Rider. May we come in? It is most urgent."

Taken aback by the rapid thrust into his room, the Archbishop stepped to one side. "I am afraid it is not convenient." Then he noticed the elderly nun. "Sister Angela." There was surprise in his voice. "What brings you here at this time of night?"

She seemed confused. "This man, Your Excellency. He made me bring him over to see you."

Valdieri looked surprised. "Made you?"

Matt decided to save Sister Angela further embarrassment. "Dr. Kappa is going to kill my girlfriend."

The Archbishop sounded bewildered. "Why would he do that?"

"It's all to do with things a nurse found in an envelope. Leanne Corbin..."

Matt broke off as he noticed the back of a man's head in the tall chair. Kappa was already here, listening to every word. The chair turned slowly to face the room. Matt sensed a flood of relief. It was Dr. Bernetti.

Someone knocked at the door. Frantic knocking. Valdieri opened it to reveal a Convent Sister who Matt had not seen before; a tall figure in white.

"Sister Colette," said the Archbishop, his voice betraying anxiety.

"Do you have one of the Sisters here, Your Excellency?" asked the breathless Sister.

Matt thought the question unnecessary. Sister Angela in her white habit and wimple was standing within touching distance.

The elderly Sister blushed a deep red. "Sister Colette," she said meekly, "please tell Reverend Mother I am only trying to help the Holy Father. He is in great danger. I know it."

Sister Colette stamped her foot in a display of pique. "Another of your visions, Sister Angela?"

"Blame me, I asked Sister Angela to bring me over here," said Matt. Sister Colette was obviously the more senior of the two. "She is worried for the Pope's safety."

"A foolish premonition, no doubt," chided Sister Colette. Then she lowered her voice. "Your Excellency, is it all right if I take this scatterbrained Sister back to her bed?"

The Archbishop bowed, probably glad of the opportunity to be rid of the forbidding Sister Colette so effortlessly. "Tell Reverend Mother I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, but I'm sure no harm has been done."

Both Sisters hurried out of the room. Valdieri turned to Matt, raising his eyebrows as though to convey relief. He spoke in English now, and sounded more American than Italian, but surely with a name like that, coming from the Vatican...

"I must ask you to leave, Mr. Rider. I have something most urgent to discuss with Dr. Bernetti."

The man in the chair spoke an imperfect English with a definite Italian accent. "We already meet, in the office of Signor Clarkson." He stood up. "You are English, yes, Signor Rider? I also worry about the safety of the Holy Father." He tipped his head on one side and made a tutting noise. "You think Jim Kappa want to harm the Pope?"

"It's possible," said Matt warily. "Last weekend we met a nurse from this clinic. Leanne Corbin. She wanted me to investigate, because of some papers she found here."

"Investigate?" Bernetti looked startled.

"I'm a private detective in England. I used to be with the police in London."

Bernetti seemed surprised. "You are here officially?"

"No, not officially." Matt turned to the Archbishop. "Can we talk?"

Valdieri nodded. "If there is danger here for the Holy Father, you must speak plainly. If you are a professional investigator, I would very much value your opinion."

"Zoé—that's my girlfriend—she found something suspicious about Leanne Corbin's death on the hospital computer. The hell of it is, she didn't tell me what. We sent six biopsy samples to England for analysis, and some papers and computer discs Leanne Corbin found. Perhaps I ought not to be speaking in front of Dr. Bernetti."

The Archbishop had no reassuring words. "Trust no one, Monsieur Rider. No one at all."

"I have to trust you."

Valdieri ran his fingers through his silver hair and seemed to be losing his concentration. He looked remarkably pale. "Tell me about these biopsy samples."

Matt glanced backwards and forwards between the two men. Bernetti seemed tense. "It really would be better if we spoke alone, Archbishop. Much better."

There was a knock at the door and Dr. Kappa pushed his way in. "Mario Bernetti," he shouted, "what the hell are you doing here?"

Bernetti reacted in panic. "What you say?"

That was when Kappa noticed Matt. "This man's really starting to bug me. Why is he still walking around the clinic?"

"He's my guest," said Valdieri, but there was no longer the firmness to his voice. He removed his glasses and wiped his forehead. "You must excuse me while I sit down. I feel terrible. So sick. I... I may be unwell."

## Chapter 45

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"THE ARCHBISHOP, he know all about you." Bernetti seized Kappa by the shoulders.

Matt watched Kappa pull himself free and wave the folder in Bernetti's face. "Just look at your tests on the Pope. You're just an amateur, Bernetti!" He flung the folder across the table and the pages scattered onto the floor.

The Archbishop sat down, looking pale and watching. He took in the dispute but said nothing.

Bernetti bent down and shuffled through a few of the papers, then slammed one page onto the table. "There, what you say to that!"

Kappa said very little. "You're just an amateur." he repeated.

"Oh, an amateur, am I? A neurosurgeon with a little brain. The Holy Father, he going to die because of you." Bernetti turned his attention to the Archbishop. "Jim Kappa, he want to kill the Holy Father. Me, I have to operate to save him."

Matt's felt uncomfortable. In another location, this bitter disagreement would have been compulsive viewing, but Zoé's life depended on precision surgery that called for a totally accurate diagnosis.

Hell!

The Archbishop got to his feet unsteadily, like a drunken man, and opened the door. "How can I possibly entrust the Holy Father's life into your hands when you are both in this emotional state?"

Kappa was the first to get a grip on his temper. "I'm sure we can come to some sensible agreement."

Bernetti hit out in fury. "You apologize to me—or I tell the truth. And then where will your precious Knights be?"

Kappa went to the door. "I'm going to my room," he said quietly. It was as though nothing had happened. But he turned and snatched the folder from the table. He banged it with his open hand, making Matt jump. "And I'm taking this. Go on, Bernetti, close this clinic with your lies. You talk about evidence. There's plenty of evidence all right. You don't really want an inquiry."

As the door slammed, Bernetti turned to Archbishop Valdieri. "That man, he is evil."

"Go after him and talk to him, Mario."

"Me? No, he bad. He bad for the Holy Father. I leave him alone." The Italian's voice shook. "Tomorrow, I operate on the Holy Father."

The Archbishop raised his hands. "We'll see, Mario, we'll see."

As Bernetti left the room Matt stayed with his back to the wall.

"I'm sorry," said the Archbishop as he ran his troubled fingers through his hair again. "You must think the surgeons here are the strangest doctors you've ever met."

"They certainly scare me." Matt sat on the arm of the chair Bernetti had been using. "Dr. Kappa has been doing tests on my girlfriend, and now he wants to operate on her brain."

"The French woman." Valdieri said the words vacantly, with no substance to the voice.

"The French woman is my girlfriend," Matt protested. The Archbishop looked a pale yellow. "Are you all right?"

"I suddenly feel unsteady, Mr. Rider. So tired. I must have eaten something disagreeable."

"You're not going to let either of those men near the Pope, are you?"

Valdieri lay back in the armchair. "The Holy Father is asleep." He pointed at the ceiling. "See, his room is directly above mine. If he knocks on the floor I will hear him. I guess I should go up and have another look. There ought to be a nurse sitting with him, but he won't permit it at night. Most unfortunate. If the doctors are not to be trusted, who can I go to for medical assistance?"

"The Sisters?" suggested Matt.

For a moment life seemed to return to Valdieri's ashen face. "You're right. If one is ever in need of urgent help, one can always throw oneself on the mercy of a mother superior. Unfortunately, there's no phone link with the Convent."

"I'll ask one of the guards fetch her."

Valdieri shook his head. "Can we trust even the guards if this clinic is in the hands of corrupt men?" He paused to swallow hard. "I'm sorry, but I feel terrible. If I'd known what I know now, I would never have allowed the Holy..."

Matt looked on in alarm as the Archbishop seemed to be fighting off a bout of nausea.

"Don't tell the GIGN about our worries, Mr. Rider. They're a powerful force, and it isn't wise to trust anyone. But the Little Sisters are trained in nursing duties. They'll know what medicine I need."

Matt looked closely into the Archbishop's eyes. "Have you been poisoned?" It was a sudden thought.

"It's possible, yes. I don't know. Can you make your way to the Mother Superior's rooms and bring her back quickly without anyone knowing?"

"Unlikely," said Matt.

"Listen to me, Mr. Rider. If Dr. Bernetti is right and Dr. Kappa wants to harm the Holy Father, just how deep does such a plot go? Deeper than Dr. Kappa, that's for sure."

"It sounds as though Dr. Bernetti wants to expose them."

"Mario Bernetti is..." Valdieri retched, and rose to his feet to be violently sick over the carpet. Too late he put a large handkerchief to his mouth. "Make sure the Holy Father is safe." It was all he could say before he fell heavily to the ground.

Matt knelt down and turned the Archbishop onto his front, an elementary first aid move to prevent the casualty choking on his own vomit. He felt for a pulse. If there was one it was too faint to detect. Quickly he rolled Valdieri over and applied artificial mouth-to-mouth respiration. The vomit from the Archbishop's lips tasted bitter in his mouth. He spat it out. If this was poison, it must be fast acting. And the man's only thoughts had been for the Pope in the room directly above.

Matt went to the washbasin to rinse his mouth. The stench of vomit filled the room. He could still go to the Mother Superior for help. She might have enough clout to rescue Zoé from Dr. Kappa. This time he must be open about it. The security team hadn't prevented Sister Colette coming across to the clinic, so they wouldn't challenge the Archbishop going in the other direction.

He glanced up at the ceiling. He'd never pass for the Archbishop himself -- but he knew a man who could.

He slipped out into the quiet corridor. Facing him were two doors, with glass panels above each one. The first door was locked, but the second opened easily to show an unused bedroom. On a chair by the door he noticed a pile of towels and two white hospital workers' jackets. With one of these and a clipboard he could pass for a doctor. Did the GIGN know all the hospital staff by sight? Unlikely. The first jacket fitted well enough. He flicked on the light and checked out the remainder of the room. No, he wouldn't pretend to be a doctor. He could see a large cardboard box marked *Dressings*. He tipped half the contents onto the bed and straightened his jacket in the mirror. Good, white would show up really well in the dark.

He returned to the Archbishop's room.

"I'm sorry." He had to say something to the body as he pulled at the black cassock which was fastened just below the neck. Underneath the cassock the Archbishop wore a black suit. Matt slipped the large wooden cross over the balding head. The purple cap had already fallen to the floor. It seemed an obscene act, stripping the body of the Archbishop to his briefs.

He folded the clothing into the box and took one last look at the Archbishop before dropping a sheet over the body. He was in this too heavily to back out now. The corridor above was a duplicate of the one below except for the pictures lining



the walls. Five doors. Matt counted them, the box high on his shoulder. He took care not to hide his face and look suspicious. The guard outside the door blocked the way in.

"What do you want?"

"I have some towels." Matt managed to sound confident.

"Leave them here."

Matt held the box high to keep the Archbishop's clothes out of sight. "I've been told to take them into the room."

"On whose authority?"

"Mine."

Matt turned at the sound of a woman's voice. Mazie Meyran was coming down the corridor in her white uniform. She sounded out of breath. "I told him to bring them up for me. Open the door quickly." Her voice was one of command.

The guard turned the knob and stood to one side.

"You're late," she said to Matt in a tone of disapproval.

Matt knew he had to play along with the make-believe. "Blame the laundry, not me," he snapped. "You nurses are always impatient."

Mazie closed the door. "What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Matt looked across at the bed. The figure beneath the sheet moved slightly, disturbed by the voices. "The Pope's life is in danger. I'm taking him to the Mother Superior."

Mazie seemed hesitant. "Who said you could?"

"The Archbishop. You'd better get down to his room and see what you can do, but I think he's dead. Poisoned. Don't alert anyone in the clinic—not even the medical staff. The Archbishop said I have to trust no one, but the Mother Superior is the only person who's able to stop Dr. Kappa operating on Zoé."

"You'll never get away with it. The guards will recognize the Holy Father."

Matt shook his head and threw Valdieri's black cassock onto the bed. "Not if we dress him in this."

Mazie gave a small gasp of disbelief. "This is the Pope you're talking about, Matt."

"Then help me get him out of here. It's our only hope. Rescue the Pope—and we rescue Zoé."

"You're dippy, Matt Rider." Mazie walked to the bed. "Holy Father," she said pulling at the sheet, "are you awake?"

The Pope turned onto his side and blinked in the light. "Get me the Archbishop."

Matt bent over the bed. The Pope looked unexpectedly old from so close up. "Archbishop Valdieri is dead, Your..." What was the right form of address for a pope? Zoé would know. She'd been brought up a Catholic. He looked at the pale man in the bed and wondered how best to show reverence to the head of a Church with over a billion members. But the pomp and ceremony would have to wait. "Someone's poisoned the Archbishop. I'm taking you to the Convent for safety."

The Pope tried to pull himself upright and seemed reassured by Mazie's white uniform. "Can I really trust you?"

"You must," said Matt. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to demote you. You're the same build as Archbishop Valdieri. If we dress you in his clothes we can walk over to the Covent without being stopped."

Was it a sense of amusement? Of wanting to play games? The pallor changed to redness and the eyes became alive. "Yes, I, too, have been aware that things are not right at this clinic."

"Not right?" said Matt. "They're all killers. And I think you're their next victim."

"You would not tell me lies, young man?"

Matt shook his head. "We have to be quick. If you call out, my girlfriend will die."

"Then God be with us. I will try to walk."

"My, oh my, it's high noon." Mazie loosened the top of her nurse's blouse. "I'll distract the guard, then I'll run downstairs and see if I can do anything for the Archbishop."

Two minutes later, holding the box on one shoulder, Matt opened the door. The guard was busy joking with Mazie and must have assumed it was Archbishop Valdieri in the black cassock and purple skullcap.

They used the elevator and reached the outside door to begin the long walk across to the gardens. Matt tried to fool himself into feeling confident. He was a hospital worker with goods for the Convent. Never mind how unlikely it was at this time of the night, the Sisters at the Convent had asked for this delivery. There was no reason for anyone to stop them. The guards would know the Archbishop more by his clothing than his face, and a man in a white jacket clearly belonged to the clinic.

\* \* \* \* \*

MAJOR LOUVIERS pressed the radio to his ear.

Jacques in the tower was insistent. "He's walking like he owns the place, Major. White coat, the lot. The Archbishop is with him. The man in the white coat is the one we can't recognize. They took a wrong turning by the archway but they're nearly at the Convent now."

"Is he staff, Jacques?"

"Not enough detail on the screen, Major. They seem to be talking together. There might be God knows what in that box. Want me to pick them up?"

Louviers stared into the darkness from the window of the old tower. "I'll get over there and take care of it. I don't want routine surveillance suffering for this one."

"Major." It was Jacques again. "Major, I have a clear view. The man in the white jacket is ringing the Convent bell. The Archbishop is still with him. There's no sign of life in the building. He's going to the window where... The randy old sod, he's after the nuns! And all with the Archbishop's approval. Perhaps Valdieri wants one for himself."

"Cut the humor, Jacques."

"Sorry, Major. Wait, they've heard something. They're going back to the main door."

Louviers hurried across the garden to get in line of sight of the Convent. A light came on in the hallway, the yellow bulb shining through the glass above the door. It showed their target standing in his white jacket, saying something into the grille. Archbishop Valdieri stood by his side.

"Can you hear what's going on, Jacques?"

"Negative, Major. The Mother Superior is talking to them. Now she's gone back. The hatch behind the grille is still open."

"We'll wait." Louviers crouched in the shelter of a fig tree growing up the old stone wall. The Sisters must know the man in white or the Mother Superior would hardly have left the grille open.

Jacques was on the radio again. "She's back, and there's another Sister with her. There's a lot of bowing and scraping going on. Now Archbishop Valdieri's gone inside. The Mother Superior is carrying something."

"What?"

"Some sort of bag, Major. She's coming your way. Be with you any second."

Louviers kept himself pressed against the fig tree.

"Major Louviers?"

Louviers groaned. His hiding place in the blackness had not been secure. "Is there a problem, Reverend Mother?" He moved into the open.

The woman sounded breathless. "Major Louviers, I don't know what you're doing here in the bushes, but you're to come with us." She lowered her voice as though taking part in a conspiracy.

Louviers breathed out. Was this some sort of charade? "One of my men will go with you, Reverend Mother."

"Don't stand there like that, Major. And you can take that scowl off your face. I can see very well in the dark."

"So it seems, Reverend Mother."

"We have to go to the clinic."

Louviers recognized the man in the white jacket. He drew his 357 Magnum. "This man should be drugged to the eyeballs. He's a suspected terrorist."

"Nonsense, Major."

Louviers backed away in surprise. The ecclesiastical authority shown over women seemed to be equally effective over men.

The Mother Superior pushed Matt towards the GIGN captain. "This is Monsieur Rider and he is here to help us. He has just rescued the Holy Father. We must be quick. It seems the Archbishop may be dead, and a young woman is certainly in great danger."

## Chapter 46

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

THE MOTHER superior struck Matt as an efficient old bird. He watched in amazement as she pumped away at Valdieri's chest. The fact that the Archbishop was only in his underwear seemed immaterial to the woman.

"Thank God you've come," Mazie Meyran said anxiously. "I think there's a sign of life."

The Mother Superior looked up sharply. "Nurse, I want you to run down to the duty area for assistance."

"He's dead," said Matt. "And he told me to trust no one." The look he got from the Mother Superior was enough to make him wish he'd kept quiet.

"He is not dead, young man. And we can trust *anyone* as long as *I* am here."

Matt felt his face going pale. He'd told Mazie not to summon help because he was sure the Archbishop was dead. It was Valdieri's own fault: he'd said not to trust anyone on the staff. He looked over at Major Louviers who was using his radio. Archbishop Valdieri had also said not to trust the GIGN.

"An emergency team is on its way," announced Louviers as he put his radio down. "Any hope?"

The Mother Superior looked up from her pumping. "There is always hope, Major. There is always hope in this dark world."

"If you'll excuse me, Reverend Mother." Louviers coughed politely. It sounded as though he had been brought up in the proximity of Catholic Sisters and knew his place. "I've arranged for two men to remain outside the Convent to keep an eye on... our special guest."

The Mother Superior snorted indignantly. With her curved nose she appeared to be almost regal. "The Pope. Say his name, Major. Say: His Holiness the Pope."

Louviers glanced uneasily at Matt. "It's supposed to be a secret, Reverend Mother."

"Monsieur Rider knows all about the Holy Father being here. You seem to forget that he has just led him to safety. Monsieur Rider is a good man; you ought to listen to him."

Matt felt awkward. "All I want is for my girlfriend to recover."

Two nurses flung the door open and hurried into the room with a wheeled stretcher. A doctor, not known to Matt, came behind them. He bent down and pulled at the Archbishop's eyelids.

"I have just given him a shot of this." The Mother Superior showed the doctor a syringe and a small glass bottle.

The doctor nodded. "A deep coma. It's not his heart. A toxin perhaps. We will empty his stomach and see what we can do." He opened Valdieri's mouth and peered inside. "Definitely a poison."

Matt shook his head. "It was all so sudden. He was talking..."

Maxwell Wilcox, the head of security, stumbled in from the corridor. He had a startled look on his face when he saw the medical staff leaning over the body of the Archbishop. "Oh, my God. Is he dead, too?"

It was enough to bring Louviers to an immediate state of alert. "Who else is dead, Wilcox?"

"It's Jim Kappa. He's..." Wilcox looked at the floor as he took Louviers by the arm. "Perhaps not in front of the Sisters."

Matt maneuvered himself to be close to Louviers so he could catch what was being said.

"What's happened to Kappa?" Louviers' eyes darted from the Archbishop to Wilcox. "Where is he?"

Wilcox spoke in a whisper. Matt had to lean over to hear. "In his room. I went there to ask him when he intended to operate and I found him... It's horrible. He's cut his throat. God, man, Jim Kappa has killed himself."

Louviers was already on his way through the door. Matt followed closely as the two men ran up the stairs to the executive suites on the top floor. A GIGN man stood outside the door to Kappa's rooms. He came smartly to attention.

"Nothing has been touched, Major. Monsieur Wilcox made so much noise when he found the body that I came immediately. He was trying to clear up the papers from the floor as I came in."

Matt stood in the doorway of the luxuriously furnished room, but it was not the decorations or the thick pile carpet that caught his attention. He'd imagined that the GIGN man would have covered the body by now. Kappa, his white face stained with blood, lay across the table in a large red pool, his hand clutching a medical scalpel.

On the carpet, sheets of paper had spilt from a blue folder. Blood still dripped onto them from the edge of the table. "Nothing's been touched," repeated the guard. "He was obviously dead."

This was not the first time Matt had seen violent death at first hand. It was certainly not the first suicide. He went forward and bent down to look at the papers.

"And what are you doing, Monsieur Rider?" snapped Louviers. "I want you out of here."

"These papers," said Matt. "They're something to do with K7."

\* \* \* \* \*

MATT SAT exhausted in the preparation room. He looked up to see Bernetti's face lit with a ghostly blue from the lightbox on the wall.

"Can you do anything?" He spoke in English, as he had only a tourist's grasp of Italian.

Bernetti shook his head slowly over the scans before replying. "The patient, she stabilized now, but there is much damaged tissue." He pointed to a mass of lines that looked like scratches on the dark film. "These are the veins and arteries."

Matt nodded. The lines ran though the mottled brain like fine spaghetti.

"This fracture, it is bad." Bernetti indicated a pale shape the size of a large coin on the film.

Matt leaned forward. It was grotesque to think that this skull with the large eye sockets was Zoé. He could see the fracture clearly as a craze of black lines. "So what are you going to do?"

"I drill in here." Bernetti indicated a rotating action with his hands.

Matt felt his stomach jump.

The Italian surgeon smiled. "You leave it to me, Signor Rider, but I make you no promise. It is bad. Very bad. But if your girlfriend she know about Nurse Corbin's death, we make sure she recover. Then she tell us everything she know."

"I'm trusting you," said Matt. He had to admit that Bernetti had really come up trumps once Kappa had removed himself from the scene. He turned away from the film on the light box. The inside of Zoé's head looked just too gruesome.

A nurse entered the room and asked if she could assist. Bernetti spoke to her in his flawed English. "I get ready now. The anesthetist, he is coming. We have to be quick. In half an hour we start the operation. That is good, eh?"

"How long will it take?" asked Matt, feeling sidelined.

"I cannot possibly say, Signor Rider. The bleeding, it has started again inside the brain. But maybe I limit the damage."

"Limit the damage?" Matt felt sick. It ought to be plain black or white: either Zoé recovered, or she didn't. The possibility of a halfway stage was... If only Zoé's parents had been at home, they could have been here within three or four hours. He'd not met them yet, and this was hardly a suitable meeting place, but in the circumstances they would have something in common to cling to.

"Your friend is on life support, but I cannot start until the anesthetist is ready. You go. You rest now, Signor Rider. The nurses, they take you to a room. When you wake, perhaps your girlfriend she will be... fine."

Matt found Bernetti's thin smile disturbing. He couldn't even think of sleep. Not with Zoé lying in the emergency room. The Archbishop was still in a coma but at least he was holding on. Zoé might not be so lucky.

"Has anyone signed the consent form, Signor Rider?"

The consent form to give the surgeon a free hand. Dr. Kappa, the killer of Leanne Corbin, had told him he didn't need such a form. Kappa had done the world a service by ending his own life.

"Dr. Kappa couldn't contact Zoé's family, so he was going ahead anyway." He looked the Italian in the eyes. "You really are going to save her?"

"Signor Rider, I see what I can do. But... maybe I have to switch off the signorina's life support machine. We see."

## Chapter 47

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

MATT SAT in an armchair in the upstairs waiting room, hardly aware that the Mother Superior was with him. Zoé's operation must have started by now. The waiting was killing him. Was Dr. Bernetti wasting time, or was the operation even more complicated than everyone originally thought?

It was no good trying to take a look. Bernetti had made it plain no one was getting into the operating room without his permission. Major Louviers even posted a GIGN man outside the door to make sure the surgeon's orders were obeyed. Now, whether he shut his eyes or kept them open, all Matt could think of was Zoé's shaved head covered in bright orange paint.

And the tubes.

The tube in her arm. The tubes to her nose, her mouth, the sound of the ventilator. The ghastly sucking noises. The whole machinery blowing and pumping, the complex process fooling Zoé's body into thinking that her heart and brain were still in control.

"Monsieur Rider, you do not look well."

Matt looked up abruptly to see the Mother Superior holding her rosary, passing the beads slowly between her fingers. "I could do with one of Sister Angela's reassuring visions," he told her.

"You must not place too much store in tales of visions, monsieur."

"It gave Sister Angela tranquility. She's... well, she seems very peaceful."

"Sister Angela learned how to be at rest in Rome. She had a traumatic adolescence. It was good for her to get away and live with the Order in Rome. It is the only place she has known apart from the area around Tourvillon."

"So where did Sister Angela learn English?"

The Mother Superior sounded surprised. "English, monsieur? Sister Angela spoke to you in English? Impossible."

The sight of Zoé on the trolley faded. "Sister Angela must be able to speak English."

"No, monsieur. Perhaps a word here and there. Our order has always spoken French. That is why Dr. Kappa no longer wanted the Sisters to work in the clinic."

"But Sister Angela told me she overheard Dr. Kappa on the phone. He was going to kill the Pope, she said."

"Sister Angela said that? I expect she heard him speaking French."

"Would you have believed her if she'd told you?" He felt in no mood for a fight and said the words without emotion. But something seemed wrong. "She overheard the surgeon speaking on the phone in English. No, she said he was speaking his own language." He leapt to his feet. "*Hell!* Excuse me."

"I do not understand, monsieur."

"Sister Angela said the surgeon was speaking his own language. You're saying she only understands French and Italian. There aren't any French surgeons here. But there is an Italian. Bernetti."

"You must take no notice of anything Sister Angela says."

"I've just told Bernetti that Zoé saw Leanne's records on the computer. He says he wants her to recover so she can tell us about it. That's the last thing he wants. I'm going to see Louviers again, and you can come with me. *Bernetti is planning to switch off Zoé's life support!*"

\* \* \* \* \*

LOUVIERS SOUNDED unimpressed when he heard Matt's theory. "Reverend Mother, I asked you to keep Monsieur Rider out of the way. You have disappointed me."

She looked offended. Matt stared in astonishment. Even GIGN captains ought to show this tall woman some awe, but her response was out of character.

"Major Louviers," she said apologetically, "this young man has misled me. I am sorry to have wasted your time."

Matt had heard enough. "Dr. Bernetti killed Leanne Corbin and he wants to kill the Pope. Now he's going to kill my girlfriend."

"Monsieur!" Louviers was on his feet. "First you tell me it is Dr. Kappa. Now it is Dr. Bernetti. Who will it be next?"

"Sister Angela heard him talking on the phone."

"Sister Angela?" The tone said enough. Louviers glanced at the Mother Superior and raised his eyes as though to suggest that both the Sister and Matt were crazy. Whatever Sister Angela had or had not seen in 1934, had marked her for life as untrustworthy. "I have to go through these before the civil authorities arrive." He

pointed to the pile of bloodstained papers from Kappa's room. "Some of the contents are too sensitive for the wrong people to see."

Matt felt helpless. Maybe Alain could get up here and tell Louviers about Leanne's discoveries. Zoé had seen something on the computer that pointed to the guilty party. Quickly he told Louviers about the icons, and how Leanne Corbin had asked him to investigate the clinic.

"So," Matt concluded, "are you going to stop Bernetti operating on my girlfriend?"

"Show me the evidence, Monsieur Rider. Show me these CDs, the biopsy samples."

"I can't. I sent them all to England."

"Pah!" Louviers shook his head firmly and opened his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Monsieur, I am here to ensure the Holy Father is unharmed. I ask you for evidence but you can show me nothing. Every second we delay the surgeon, is a moment lost for your friend's chances of recovery. You understand, monsieur?"

Matt turned away. "I'll go and rest."

Like hell he would. He had the phone card ready in his pocket.

The Mother Superior got up. "I will go with Monsieur Rider. I think he is in need of counseling."

It was a genuine offer, Matt could sense it. Somehow he managed to get on with this woman where other mortals failed.

Louviers wagged a finger at the Mother Superior. "Stay with him and keep him away from the operating room. The senior personnel are under arrest, including Monsieur Wilcox."

"What's the charge," asked Matt.

"The charge, monsieur? How about gross medical misconduct?"

"Sounds good."

"It will do while we investigate further. Reverend Mother, think yourself lucky the Sisters are not being interrogated." The passing threat was probably nothing more than an act of bravado brought on by the fact that the Mother Superior was already leaving the room.

"Now everyone can get out of here." The dismissive wave of Louviers' hand brought a red tint to the Mother Superior's olive skin.

Matt felt frustrated. As the door closed he said, "I still think Bernetti is going to kill Zoé."

The reply from the Mother Superior was unexpected. "I did not want the Major to know my thoughts, but I believe you are right, monsieur. Quick, we will go down to the operating room and try to stop Dr. Bernetti."

## **Chapter 48**

### **Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon**



MATT FOUND the way to the operating room blocked by one of Louviers' men holding an MP5 submachine gun. He kicked out past the guard, smashing his foot against the door. "*Open up!*"

The guard used the butt of the gun to hit Matt to one side. "Dr. Bernetti is in there," he retorted. "All outside contact is forbidden."

"I'm the patient's friend."

"Major Louviers says entry is absolutely prohibited."

As Matt got to his feet he looked carefully at the heavy doors. Even without the armed guard to stop him they were not going to give way easily.

"We will go." The Mother Superior caught hold of Matt's arm "We must not put too much faith in something Sister Angela said, monsieur. Sister Angela is a lovely member of our little community, but she may not always be reliable. I tell you this in the greatest confidence of course."

The woman seemed to have thrown in the towel rather easily. She'd done the same in front of Major Louviers, but on that occasion it had clearly been an act. Perhaps she was being devious again.

Louviers' man watched suspiciously but did nothing. Matt lowered his voice as they walked away from the double doors. "Leanne Corbin thought that there was something bad going on here."

"I did not want to say it in front of the Major, but I believe Dr. Kappa has been raising huge funds for his secret organization. I should have told the Archbishop of my suspicions."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was afraid he might cancel the visit of the Holy Father. It is the first time a Vicar of Christ has come to our humble site. I was wrong not to say anything. Very wrong."

"I need to look at the computer records."

"MedicStat. If we can find a terminal perhaps I can get the program to run. I sometimes help out here." This tall woman in white appeared remarkably down-to-earth. She raised a finger. "If Monsieur Wilcox is under arrest, we can safely use his room. What do you want to see?"

"Zoé turned up something suspicious in Leanne Corbin's records in the MedicStat program."

The Mother Superior no longer sounded so sure. "It may not be ethical. I know how to use the program, but I certainly do not have authority to read any of the confidential files."

Matt dared put a hand on the white shoulder. "You worry too much."

Twenty seconds later they opened the door to Maxwell's spacious office where the computer was already up and running. The monitor glowed with a screensaver of a large bird swooping over the Avignon countryside. But did a non-worldly woman really have a clue how one of these things worked?

"Are you sure you know how to get into the patients' records?"

"Sometimes I have helped in the office using MedicStat for ordering medical supplies. It is simple to work with, monsieur. See?"

Slender fingers typed expertly on the keys.

The Mother Superior's eyes sparkled. "We have a computer at the Convent. I write stories and music for our devotions. You appear surprised that I know how to use such a device."

He shook his head. "Perhaps a little."

The menu flashed on the screen. "What are we looking for, monsieur?"

"I want everything you can find on Leanne Corbin."

"I know the code." The screen changed. "There, monsieur."

Matt leaned forward. These were details of Leanne's training and previous employment. If Zoé had turned up nothing more interesting than this while waiting for Kappa to come, she would not have got so excited. So what had she noticed?

"You want me to go to the next page, monsieur?" The Mother Superior in her white habit looked out of place at the sharp end of modern technology.

"Go on." Matt held his breath.

"Ah, you see, here are the details of poor Leanne's death. I think perhaps this is confidential."

"It's *all* confidential. That's why we're looking."

The Mother Superior seemed shocked at this response. "You cannot expect me to condone the examination of personal information."

"We're only having a quick look." He'd not expected such a moral attitude. This woman was too upright to be mixed up in PI work. Any moment now she'd decide to log off.

"*There!*" He touched the screen and swore in French. "Bernetti told Alain Corbin that Dr. Kappa took Leanne into intensive care. He didn't, Bernetti did it himself. See? *Kappa* wasn't even present according to these records. *Merde!*"

The obscenity failed to bring a trace of redness to the Mother Superior's dark cheeks. "I have often thought that the man conceals guilt. Will Major Louviers believe us now?"

Matt considered their position. At least it was "us". Louviers seemed to have his mind set on one course only—protecting the Pope no matter what happened to anyone else. He could hardly be blamed for that. "I'm going to phone Alain Corbin."

"I do not think we should remain in this office, monsieur."

Matt tried not to smile. "I do this sort of thing for a living." He picked up the phone. "Go on down to the operating room. Please."

"I will shut the door behind me. You make me feel almost... almost like a rebellious convent girl again, monsieur." The Mother Superior walked slowly and thoughtfully from the room. She was probably still fretting about the ethics of looking at someone's personal records.

The Corbins' phone rang for a long time, the tone jabbing its monotonous beep into his ear. "Come on, Alain, come on!"

"*Oui?*"

"Alain, this is Matt Rider. Zoé has had a serious accident. I want you to think back to when Leanne brought back the papers and CDs."

"She found them in the corridor." Alain sounded as though he had been asleep. "She was going to search someone's room, but then she died."

"Was it Dr. Bernetti's room?"

Even over the phone Matt imagined he could see the bushy moustache and the shrug of the huge shoulders. "It is not important."

"Alain, it's very important. Do you still have anything she brought home? *Anything?*"

Again the hesitation. "I thought I had burned the lot, but this evening I found some lists of saints names, and accounts in U.S. dollars. I will burn them if you like. I do not want Leanne's name dragged through the dirt for theft."

"*No, Alain, listen!*" Matt felt panicky; afraid the Frenchman would put the phone down and not answer it again. "Kappa's dead. I think Bernetti did it. And I think Bernetti killed Leanne."

"Why do you say such a thing?"

"Bernetti asked you if Leanne brought anything home. I can't discuss it now, but I want you to bring those papers here."

Alain sounded uncertain. "Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight. Bernetti is going to operate on Zoé. Remember how he caught her looking at the computer? We need evidence before anyone will believe us."

"Bernetti would not dare kill Zoé. The police will find out."

"A surgeon could kill anyone during an operation, especially if it's a difficult one. Bring those papers and come to..."

"Yes?"

There were still problems. "The GIGN have got this site covered—and they're good. Too good. They'll not let you through the gate."

"Maybe my brother will know what to do."

"That's it. Use your brother's clothes. Dress as a priest. Say you've come to give Zoé the last rites. Say anything as long as it gets you through the gates."

"But I have no car."

"Then call a taxi. This is urgent. Bernetti has been with Zoé for a long time, and he's locked the doors to the operating room."

Alain sounded much more coherent now. "I will come, *mon ami*. I will do my best for Leanne, and for Zoé."

Matt replaced the phone. Bernetti had probably killed Kappa, certainly poisoned Archbishop Valdieri, and poisoned Leanne with something deadly while in intensive care. This man now had Zoé's life in his hands.

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LOUVIERS REPLACED the handset. Using his radio he called up his man on the gate. "Paul? In about thirty minutes, you'll be getting a visit from a priest. He'll be in a taxi. The instant he arrives I want him brought to me at the clinic front desk. Okay?"

"Right, Major."

"He'll have some papers with him. I want them as well, and no slip-ups."

"Leave it to me, Major."

Louviers switched off the radio. Dress as a priest? There was no doubt about it, for a private investigator that Englishman was smart.

## Chapter 49

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

MATT LOOKED at his watch. He couldn't afford to wait for Alain. Maybe Bernetti was already drilling into Zoé's skull. Through the office window he could see the landing-lights of a helicopter sweep over the ground behind the clinic. What on earth did the patients think about such antics at this time of night?

"Monsieur Rider." The Mother Superior made him jump as she came back into Wilcox's room.

"Any luck?"

"The guard will not let me in, monsieur. And the nurses with Doctor Bernetti will not help. They say there are serious complications with the operation."

Matt caught her by the arm. "I'm going to smash the door in." He'd broken down a few doors in his time.

"Be careful, Monsieur Rider, the guard has a gun. I will go with you. Maybe I can help."

That was all he needed—the Mother Superior trying to take on the GIGN. The guard looked at them warily from the end of the long corridor, where he stood in front of the double doors leading to the operating room.

"I could try to distract him, monsieur."

Matt had a better idea. "Can you find a roll of surgical tape?"

"I know where to get you a big roll, monsieur." And she was gone. The guard held his MP5 as Matt walked forward. Matt put up a hand in a gesture of peace. "I'm waiting for someone."

The GIGN man was not to be fooled. He cocked his gun. "Stay still, monsieur, while I check with Major Louviers on your movements."

"The Mother Superior is meeting me here." Matt noticed the fire extinguisher on the wall. It would make a great weapon, but he would have to be quick. Louviers' man already had the radio to his mouth.

"Here she comes." He pointed at the doors. An old trick but the man looked round. Matt snatched the extinguisher from the wall and flung it at the guard. The guard raised his weapon as a shield but the heavy extinguisher drove the gun into his chest, smashing him against the wall.

Instantly, Matt leapt forward and clamped an arm tightly around the guard's neck. As they both fell to the floor the guard let out a scream of rage.

"Be careful, monsieur. Do not hurt him."

The Mother Superior had returned. She stood above them as they struggled, a wide roll of white surgical tape held out helplessly. "Is this what you wanted, monsieur?"

"Quick, tear off a long strip."

She obeyed without hesitation.

"Wrap it round his mouth or he'll bring the whole outfit here."

She tried, but the tape became tangled in her white habit.

Matt increased his grip until he felt the guard's body go limp. "Have another go." The first strip covered the guard's mouth. A second strip tied his wrists together behind his back.

"His ankles, monsieur?" The Mother Superior was catching on fast.

"I want him trussed up like a turkey," grunted Matt. "His knees next." He kicked the MP5 away. "Give me the tape."

The man stayed motionless.

"We'd better make sure he's still alive," said Matt breathlessly when he had taped every limb that could move. "You check. I'm not very good at it."

The Mother Superior bent over the body and pulled the surgical tape well clear of the nose. She nodded. "Alive and breathing well."

The man's eyes opened, filled with such fury that Matt looked away quickly.

"I'll get the gun. We're going in." He retrieved the MP5 and noticed the bent barrel. The fire extinguisher had been heavy. The submachine gun would never work, but it might fool Bernetti.

The doors were locked from the inside. Matt rattled them frantically but no one came. Then he noticed a phone on the wall that was unlike the other phones in the clinic.

"Where does this ring?"

"Directly in the operating room, monsieur."

"Then why didn't you..." He decided to keep silent. The Mother Superior had been nothing but helpful so far. He picked up the phone and a woman answered immediately.

"Senior nurse."

"Let me speak to Dr. Bernetti."

"Can't do. He's busy right now."

"It's urgent. Dr. Bernetti is going to kill the patient."

"The patient is dead."

It couldn't be true. "Say that again."

"Dr. Bernetti has just switched off the patient's life support."

The central lock of the double doors was going to be the weak point. No one would have designed it to withstand a serious attack. The long table by the wall had a fair bit of weight to it. Matt slammed it forward, smashing the end into the center of the doors.

There was a sharp noise from the catch as something gave. Again he slammed the table forward. The doors swung open.

The lights flooded down onto the high table, illuminating Zoé's body under a green sheet. A huge stainless steel clamp held her orange painted head in place. Bernetti and the medical team stared at him in alarm.

For a moment Matt stood where he was, dazed by the scene. Air bottles and trolleys of surgical equipment. And the team packing everything away.

"I am so sorry," said a nurse coming forward. "Dr. Bernetti did his best, but unfortunately there were complications."

Suddenly Matt realized that the room was silent. The tubes were no longer hissing. The machinery was quiet.

"Dr. Bernetti did everything he could. He said had no choice but to switch off the life support."

"Switch it on again," Matt shouted.

The nurse took him by the arm. "You must leave immediately."

He pulled himself free. "Bernetti killed Nurse Corbin. You have to keep Zoé alive."

The team hesitated. One of the nurses went to the trolley, obviously in two minds.

The Mother Superior nodded. "Do as he says."

Nothing more. But it was enough. Her voice carried more authority than Bernetti's. Quickly the oxygen began to hiss again. Two nurses pulled back the green sheet and placed the defibrillator paddles on Zoé's chest. Her body jerked violently.

Bernetti ran forward, pulling at the tubes. Matt jerked the submachine gun, even though the barrel was bent. If he pulled the trigger the barrel would blow, and he'd kill himself.

Bernetti stood with his arms raised as Matt approached the operating trolley to give Zoé's body a kiss. The Mother Superior held out her arm. "You must not get in the way, monsieur. Leave it to the professionals."

"Bernetti did this. It's his fault that Zoé's dead."

The surgeon snatched up a scalpel that had fallen to the floor, catching Matt unprepared. "The girl, I make sure she die."

He knew how to divert a knife attack and caught Bernetti's wrist as the scalpel came down. But the Italian twisted himself free and ran for the operating table. Matt caught him by the shoulder and tried to pull him away from Zoé. The nurses were no help at all. They just looked on.

"Raise the alarm." Matt grabbed the Italian by the throat. Up came the scalpel, waving so close to his face that he could feel the heat from Bernetti's hand.

He pushed his fingers deep under the surgeon's soft chin, forcing the head backwards. Bernetti struggled to regain his balance but his white surgical boots slipped on the wet floor and he fell sideways into the defibrillator trolley. Matt noticed two buttons on the hand-held unit. *Yellow button charges, black button triggers.* It was as though Zoé was speaking as he recalled their earlier conversation.

He grabbed the two paddles that looked like domestic irons and pressed the yellow button. The main console hummed with energy. Then as Bernetti retrieved the scalpel from the floor, Matt forced the paddles each side of the Italian's head and pushed the black button.

Bernetti's muscles tightened as a massive jolt of energy blasted through his body. The shock ran through Matt, flinging him away.

The surgeon's arm slashed sideways in an uncontrolled contraction of muscles, the surgical blade in his hand slicing through his windpipe. He gave a feeble cry of agony as blood flowed from his mouth and neck.

A nurse screamed.

Bernetti lay on the floor still grasping the scalpel.

Louviers hurried into the room with two of his men. "Stay where you are, Monsieur Rider."

## Chapter 50

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"YOU TIE up one of my men, and suddenly another surgeon is dead. What am I to do with you, Monsieur Rider?"

Louviere sat with Matt in the area outside the operating room. Matt had been so occupied with rescuing Zoé that he'd not realized Bernetti had slashed him several times with the scalpel. He felt a stinging in his arm, and noticed for the first time the cuts in his shirt.

"You should have listened to me," Matt said coldly.

"Perhaps I should," agreed Louviere. "Dr. Bernetti is dead but I believe you killed him in self-defense. I am sure there will be no charges. I have learned a lot from you, Monsieur Rider. One of my men has also learned a lesson. He will not, I have to tell you, be staying on in the GIGN. We make no allowance for failure."

"The Mother Superior helped me overcome him."

Louviere shook his head. "That, monsieur, will not be going in anyone's records. You may be interested to know that the young priest is asking for you at the front desk. He has some papers."

His heart pumping wildly, Matt tried to look only vaguely interested. "Can I see him?"

"He is helping us with our inquiries, Monsieur Rider."

He'd been a fool not to realize that Louviere would have tapped every phone line. He recalled the Archbishop's warning. *Do not trust anyone, not even the GIGN.*

"Is Alain in trouble?"

Louviere shook his head unemotionally. "Relax, monsieur, I have searched Dr. Bernetti's room. The contents of his desk will enable us to close down more than K7. We are on our way to recovering a horde of stolen art."

"So what happens now?"

"The national police will take over. It is not a one-man band, not an operation of this size. Bernetti and his friends stood to net millions of dollars. This whole clinic is a watering hole of corruption, and everyone will know it was you who blew the whistle."

"I'd rather you kept that bit to yourself," said Matt firmly. "But at least I saved Zoé."

"You saved her from Dr. Bernetti, Monsieur Rider, but her condition is still critical. Her life support was switched off for nearly two minutes."

"Is there no one here who can help her?"

"I have some good news. God knows you deserve it. Two surgeons have just arrived by helicopter from Rome. Archbishop Valdieri summoned them shortly before he was taken ill."

"The cavalry?"

Louviere smiled. "The Archbishop realized it would be irresponsible to allow any of the clinic's surgeons to operate on the Holy Father, so he called for outside help. He wants you to know he is grateful for all you have done, monsieur."

"He wants me to know? Archbishop Valdieri has recovered?"

"The Archbishop, I am glad to say, is on the way to recovery."

"He was dead. I checked for a pulse," Matt insisted.

Louviers offered Matt a cigarette, which he refused. The Major replaced the pack in his pocket. "His pulse was too weak to detect by hand. The Archbishop understands that you put the Holy Father's life before his."

"That's not quite true," admitted Matt. "I did it for Zoé."

"We must not disillusion Archbishop Valdieri, Monsieur Rider. He was ready to give his life for the Holy Father."

"These two surgeons who've come from Rome, are they members of K7?"

Louviers sounded uncomfortable. "I... I cannot be sure."

"What's going on, Major?" Matt looked at Louviers in astonishment. "If they're from K7, they won't want any of us to live to tell the tale. And you're prepared to let them loose on Zoé?"

"Monsieur Rider, your girlfriend is not going to get through the night without expert surgery. Bernetti may have been right to switch off the life support machine to save her from a painful and inevitable death. Only time will tell."

"I'd better have another go at phoning Zoé's parents. You'll need their consent."

Louviers shook his head. "One of the surgeons from Rome has already started to operate. I have kept the clinic's senior anesthetist under open arrest so that he can assist."

"And the Pope?" Matt looked up as a nurse appeared at the door to the consulting room. She carried a black medical bag. "Is the Pope ill, or did Bernetti and his friends in Rome have something to do with it?"

"I have told you all I know, monsieur." Louviers sighed. "Who can say what fabrications we will find in the records?"

A man in a surgeon's jacket now entered the room and spoke quietly to the nurse. He was Italian, probably one of the new surgeons from Rome. He glanced at Matt, but whatever he said to the nurse, Matt was unable to hear.

Matt held the pad to his slashed arm. He thought again of the bright orange paint—and Zoé's shaved head. The hiss of artificial ventilation. And the tubes.

"Why aren't you both operating on Zoé Champanelle?"

The Italian spoke softly. "Monsieur Rider, at the moment, I am concerned for your injuries."

Matt looked at the red-stained pad on his arm. "Just get on and help Zoé."

The surgeon shook his head. "I am sorry, Monsieur Rider, you misunderstand. That scalpel fell on the floor. In all operating rooms, even the best, there are dangerous bacteria. You could be in grave danger."

Matt felt his pulse quicken and the cuts began to throb more intensely. "So what do I do?"

The nurse opened the black case. She pulled a syringe and a small glass bottle from inside.

"Is that for me?" Matt felt a rising horror.

The nurse sank the needle into the membrane across the top of the bottle.

Matt held his breath as she pulled the pad off his arm. "It's hard to know who trust," he said.



The blood on his arm welled up and quickly started to run in a steady flow. "Yes, very hard," she replied as she held the syringe upright.

Matt stared at the tip of the needle as a fine streak of liquid squirted high into the air. He swallowed and braced himself.

The nurse did not even smile.

The needle went in with a sharp stab.

## Chapter 51

### Two days later

"SHE'S REGAINING consciousness, Mr. Rider."

Matt woke and looked round the clinic bedroom. He'd been dreaming that a large hawk was swooping down on him as he pushed his old Mini down a long drive outside a derelict house. But he was on his feet in an instant at the nurse's voice.

Zoé lay in intensive care, her head now heavily bandaged. Matt could see no signs of movement, just hear the hiss of tubes.

"She opened her eyes," the nurse assured him, but they were closed now.

"Zoé," he said, leaning over and kissing her forehead as he had done before her operation. "Can you hear me?"

Zoé opened her eyes and stared at him. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I will marry you."

## Chapter 52

*TO HIS HOLINESS THE POPE  
FROM ARCHBISHOP STEPHEN VALDIERI  
GEMELLI HOSPITAL, ROME*

*It is with the greatest pleasure that I learn today of the successful completion of your surgery here in Rome. I join with the Church in her prayers for your speedy return to full health. However, I feel extreme guilt over the way I handled your security arrangements. I attempted to grasp for too much, and under those circumstances I should never have allowed you to travel to the Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon.*

*I confess that I was carried away by an excess of zeal in trying to conduct investigations into the ethical running of the clinic and into the supply of stolen religious art. The safeguard of your health should have been my sole function in this instance. It is no secret that I have come under considerable pressure from many senior staff to move away from Rome. Therefore, after prayerful consideration I now wish to advise you that I feel compelled to resign from...*

Valdieri paused, his pen pressed against his cheek. Then he smiled to himself, screwed up the paper and tossed it into the bin by the side of his hospital bed.

Resign? More than eighty percent of the ancient icons from Smolensk had been recovered, he had K7 on the run, and the Holy Father was doing just fine.

He nodded to himself as he looked again at the morning mail. An invitation from the New York diocese. An ecclesiastical position at Saint Patrick's Cathedral; a position with a fancy name and nothing too onerous in the way of duties. He was discretely being given the push, in spite of the apparently generous relocation. Maybe it was time to leave Rome for a more tranquil life. Return to America where it all began. Yes, he would make a complete break and go it alone—with God.

## Chapter 53

### Clinic of the Little Sisters of Tourvillon

"SORRY I COULDN'T get here last night, kiddo. It's a hell of a way down to Avignon by car."

Matt smiled at the way Ken pronounced the "g" in Avignon. "I'll take you up to see Zoé. And no wisecracks about her hair—or lack of it."

"Okay, Matt. You know me."

"Yes, and that's why I'm warning you."

Matt led the way from the front desk. Zoé was being cared for by the token staff that remained. He felt sorry for the nurses now the authorities had closed the place. Perhaps they would be able to find work in other clinics. Mazie Meyran was staying on in Avignon, and he found himself wondering if Mazie and Alain would get together one day—and felt almost shocked by his fertile imagination so soon after Leanne's death.

They found Zoé sitting on the balcony in a patch of shade, looking through binoculars at a pair of black kites soaring above the hillside. On a low table by her side lay her silver flute. Learning to play the tricky sections of Debussy's *Arabesque* had surely helped in her recovery.

"*Bonjour*, Ken." Zoé smiled broadly as she put the binoculars down, seemingly unaware of her medical dressings and shaved head. Ken stood in the doorway, embarrassed to go further into the room. "You're properly dressed, I hope. My, you look rough."

Matt groaned but Zoé just laughed. "I looked worse a week ago." She glanced at Matt. "Have you told him yet?"

"We're getting married," said Matt.

"You, kiddo, getting hitched?"

He nodded. "I can't risk losing Zoé, but I'm not walking out on you, Ken. Not yet."

"I suppose it's congratulations then."

"What do you mean, suppose?" demanded Matt. "Just because you and Mrs. Habgood..."

"So what's happening to this flash place?" interrupted Ken.

"The Mother Superior wants to go back into business in a small way. Apparently the visions of Sister Angela still have some mileage in them."

"You are being cynical," warned Zoé.

"No, I'm not." Matt made an effort to sound offended. "I've been getting on well with Reverend Mother now that I've promised to watch my language. Underneath her tough shell, I've discovered a caring, Christian woman."

Ken smiled enthusiastically. "I'd like to meet her."

Matt shook his head. "She's tough, but not that tough."

"Do you two know the waves you've made?"

"We've had no reporters or interviews, by order of the Vatican. I gather there's a big scandal in the world outside."

Ken slumped into a white wicker chair and looked exhausted from his journey. "It sounds as though the Pope is going to survive. Any talk of an award?"

Matt pulled a face. "They can't work out my motives for dressing the Pope up as Archbishop Valdieri and taking him to the Mother Superior."

"What he is trying to say," said Zoé, "is he did it all for me."

"You saved the Pope's life, Matt. The publicity hasn't done my business any harm. I'm dropping hints that it was an assignment from the Vatican."

"I wouldn't put it past him," said Matt quietly to Zoé.

"Good business sense," said Ken. "Quite some racket they were running here. All sorts of famous names have been dragged into the papers. What a mess." He stood up and walked towards the balcony.

"They had a great scam." Matt smiled briefly. "The fees were sky high, and some of the patients weren't even ill."

Ken seemed fully at ease now. "The doctors must have been sending specimens off for analysis. Four of the ones you sent me came back with the all clear. Wouldn't that have been a bit of a give-away?"

Matt breathed in deeply. The smell of lavender was intense. "The patients never saw the lab reports. They were just told they were terminally ill."

"Or the surgeons sent an unhealthy biopsy from someone else to an outside lab," added Zoé. "No one was thinking to do a DNA test. They had plenty of samples from every blood group in the freezer, some good and some malignant. That is where Leanne got the samples for us. That woman, she was courageous. No wonder they called her Lion Woman."

Ken shook his head. "What if the patient went somewhere for a second opinion?"

Zoé was her usual chirpy self. "This is supposed to be a holy site. They were told they might miss their miracle by waiting."

"I still can't believe they never got caught out before you two came on the scene."

"That is because you are not in medicine, Ken." Zoé seemed wound up. "It is a fear of everyone that they have something seriously wrong."

"I know the feeling." Ken pulled himself upright in the wicker chair. "Last year I had a gallstone. Remember, Matt? The pain was dreadful. If the doctor told me I had cancer I'd have sold up the business to pay for a cure. I take it no patients died?"

Zoé leaned against the balcony rail. "Some of them did. Many of them were seriously ill, and beyond medical help. K7 had members around the world to refer their patients here, whether they were sick or not."

Ken frowned. "But when the ones who weren't sick got home, their local hospital would see nothing had been wrong."

Zoé shook her head. It looked like smooth ivory, with dark bristles showing an outline where her hair had been. A large pad covered the point of entry for the life-saving operation. "Often all the surgeons did was cut out the tissue, even if there was no cancer." She made a slow slashing movement across her front. "Their own doctor would find healthy scar tissue when they got home, and tell them they were now completely healed."

Ken rubbed his stomach. "All that worry over health. No wonder everyone was keen to pay up. How did this Bernetti kill your nursing friend?"

"Toxins," said Matt. "Bernetti was an expert with toxins. He realized Leanne had found his papers and CDs on the Russian icons. Maybe he caught her looking through his desk. I never did buy her story about finding them in the corridor."

"I think Leanne had the headaches anyway," said Zoé, "so Dr. Bernetti had a good excuse. He told Alain Corbin it was Dr. Kappa who operated on Leanne. He wanted, I think, to divert the suspicion."

Ken looked at Matt accusingly. "See, I told you not to mess with them." He turned his attention to Zoé's head. "You *are* going to get better?"

"Of course she is." Matt glared at his boss. In a few minutes the sun would be round on the whole balcony. Perhaps a tan would make Zoé's shaved head less conspicuous.

"Was Dr. Kappa planning to kill the Pope?" asked Ken.

Matt shook his head. "Kappa wanted to heal whatever was wrong with the Pope and be so famous that the Vatican would leave K7 alone. But he knew Bernetti had a different plan. One that would really blow it for his Knights."

"I wish I could have met this Bernetti," said Ken. "He sounds a crazy doctor to have around the place. Another twenty-four hours and the Pope would have been dead. Is that right?"

Matt shrugged. "Bernetti was a Catholic—okay, a lapsed Catholic—but kill the Pope? Sister Angela overhead him phoning someone in Rome, but Louviers thinks he may just have been talking big."

"I do not agree. I think Bernetti and his friends wanted the Pope dead," said Zoé. "There were hundreds of icons, and Bernetti knew that the Holy Father had been making investigations. Louviers thinks he arranged for Dr. Bisenti and Professor Rossano in Rome to be served with food containing something toxic, to stop them coming here to take charge of the surgery. They would soon see if Bernetti was doing something wrong. With the Pope dead, the new man might have more important things in his bowl. Or on his plate. Or whatever it is you English say."

"And Bernetti stole these icons from the Russians?"

Matt shook his head. "No, Ken, not Bernetti. An American diplomat working in Moscow bought them illegally in the nineteen seventies from a corrupt Communist official. The diplomat smuggled out a few at a time to a colleague in Italy."

"In the diplomatic bag?"

"Probably," agreed Matt. "Whatever one of those looks like. The diplomat was transferred from Moscow to Washington in nineteen eighty. He moves to Rome when he retires in nineteen eighty-five and hangs the icons on every wall of his house. He sits with them all day. Then he's taken ill."

"Punishment for his greed?"

"A brain tumor." Matt wished Ken wouldn't interrupt. "Bernetti was his specialist at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome. The diplomat is dying and asks for a priest. Bernetti guesses the man has a secret and prescribes drugs that make the man so confused he thinks Bernetti is a priest. He tells Bernetti about his apartment and where to find the key. So Bernetti and his friends raid the apartment as soon as the diplomat dies, and help themselves to the icons."

"But guess who was working on the ward," said Zoé.

Ken laughed. "Crazy old Sister Angela?"

"She's not crazy," protested Matt. "She was an orderly doing unpleasant work like emptying bedpans, but she knew something dishonest was going on."

"And she was keeping an eye on Bernetti?"

"She confronted him about his treatment of the diplomat when the man died, and he told her she would be declared insane and locked away for ever if she told anyone."

"And she believed him, kiddo?"

"She did. She's been brought up to be afraid of anyone in authority. Then she comes back here to rejoin the Sisters, and one day Bernetti turns up. They recognize each other but each one is afraid of the other. So they stay well apart until..."

"...Until Sister Angela overhears Bernetti on the phone," guessed Ken.

"Bernetti knows the Vatican is on to him because Archbishop Valdieri comes to his room here at the clinic asking questions. Valdieri sees a recent photograph of Bernetti and Kappa that was taken in the room, and in the background there's a large icon hanging above Bernetti's desk."

"Wasn't anyone suspicious?"

"Bernetti told everyone it was a modern copy. But there's just a photo of some kid on the wall when Valdieri calls, so he knows Bernetti has something to hide. Bernetti was evil."

"I wouldn't have thought Dr. Kappa was a saint," added Ken.

"Dr. Kappa was more cunning than evil." Zoé stretched, revealing a bare midriff covered in bruises. "I think he saw how much money he could make by a little false diagnosis, followed by unnecessary surgery. Then he heard about the visions of Sister Angela, and his greed took over. It is sad when people are asked to pay for their miracle."

Ken shuffled his feet awkwardly. He took Matt aside. "How soon can Zoé travel?"

"You mean how soon till I'm back at work?"

Ken gave an embarrassed laugh. "Something like that, kiddo. It's hectic there now."

"Zoé's parents are picking her up from here in a few days, and taking her back to Clermont-Ferrand. You were right about Zoé's mother. She's been here, giving me hell, blaming me for the accident."

"Come back with me. It's much safer than facing an angry mother-in-law."

"Future mother-in-law."

"It doesn't get better. Believe me."

"As soon as Zoé's well enough, we're going to get married in Clermont-Ferrand, with or without her mother's blessing. And there's a bit of good news for you. One of the nurses from England has written to say that the unpleasant sister has left the hospital where Zoé works, so we won't need to move. I didn't realize it until I came here, but I think I actually enjoy working for you."

They walked out to join Zoé again on the balcony. Ken pointed down the hill towards the village of Tourvillon. "Is that the rock you fell from, young lady? That will teach you to go looking for bird life in the dark. Hell of a height."

Zoé smiled and picked up her flute. "Luckily, it was only my head." She played a few bars of the Arabesque. "By the way, Ken, those little *micros* you sent were garbage. Next time please do not be so tight of the fist."

"Is that so?" Ken looked closely at Zoé. "I don't how to say this, young lady, but did you know your head is a mess? You'll have to buy yourself a wig."

