

MARIO
GIORDANO



BOOK 1
DEMONS AMONG US

About the Book

Rome. Turmoil in the Eternal City. The pope has resigned and disappeared without a trace. Nobody knows if he is even still alive.

At the same time, his closest confidants are being murdered in the most gruesome ways. As the conclave convenes to elect a successor to the Holy See, Vatican reporter Peter Adam begins to search for the missing pope. His search leads him to a mysterious underground religious fraternity, which has been working against the Church for centuries. Its members base their beliefs on a medieval prophecy: He who shall succeed the current Pope will call himself Peter II. And he will be the last to hold the See of St. Peter.

Is the apocalypse at hand? And what will it bring? The fulfillment of mankind's oldest fantasies, or the end of the world?

About the Series

Written by award-winning screenwriter and author Mario Giordano, "Apocalypse" is gripping and explosive: what starts out as a sophisticated Vatican conspiracy soon develops into a uniquely intense and spectacular thriller.

APOCALYPSIS is a serial novel told in twelve installments per book. The entire saga is revealed throughout three complete novels; this is the complete first novel.

About the Author

Mario Giordano was born 1963 in Munich, studied psychology in Düsseldorf and writes novels for adults old and young as well as screenplays (his credits include Tatort, Schimanski, Polizeiruf 110, Das Experiment). He lives in Berlin.



BOOK 1
DEMONS AMONG US



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CONTENTS

Episode 0	◆	SIGNS
Episode 1	◆	DEMONS
Episode 2	◆	ANCIENT
Episode 3	◆	THOTH
Episode 4	◆	BAPHOMET
Episode 5	◆	ISLAND OF LIGHT
Episode 6	◆	ELIXIR
Episode 7	◆	VISION
Episode 8	◆	SETH
Episode 9	◆	WEARILY ELECTORS
Episode 10	◆	THE SEVEN BOWLS OF WRATH
Episode 11	◆	THE THING UNDER THE ROCK
Episode 12	◆	CONCLAVE



Episode 0
SIGNS

I

April 28, 2011, Annapurna section, Himalayas

She'd lost the rosary, too, quite a while ago. It was lying six hundred feet above her, somewhere in the snow next to the trail. But since then she'd also lost the trail. In fact, she'd lost just about everything: her gloves, her team, her crampons, her water and even the walkie-talkie. Everything except her life and her faith. The question was what she would lose next.

Above her was the peak of Annapurna, glowing in the light of the afternoon sun. So close that it felt as if she could touch it. Yet they had not made it to the apex. Tracy, Laura, Betty and Susan were dead. They had fallen through a snow bridge over a crevasse and within a split second had disappeared from the face of the earth. Annapurna had simply swallowed them, leaving her desperately alone.

Three weeks earlier, Anna had joined a group of female mountain climbers from the United States and Canada, and together they had started their ascent of Annapurna Himal, the tenth highest mountain in the world. Anna was an experienced climber - she was certainly no neophyte of climbing - and the Annapurna section was one of the most popular tourist destinations in all of Nepal. Two days ago, she and four other women from Camp V had set out to climb to the summit. It was early in the morning and the weather was clear. Everything seemed to be going fine, despite the pain and the struggle for each and every step. They had been confident, almost euphorically convinced that they would reach the summit by midday - then they crossed the snow bridge.

When her companions fell into the crevasse, Anna's backpack and the crampons fell with them. Only a second earlier, she had pulled the backpack off her shoulders because she needed a break. So she'd been lucky – if you didn't count the fact that she had lost her gloves as she tried in vain to find her companions in the crevasse.

Without her gloves, she had a serious problem: the bitter cold. Even in the afternoon, the maximum temperature at an altitude of twenty-five thousand feet was minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit. The night would bring temperatures as low as minus forty degrees. Without gloves, Anna's body temperature was dropping quickly. Her core temperature was already only ninety-one degrees Fahrenheit. She began to shiver uncontrollably, a natural response as her body tried to create additional heat. However, there was another problem: the thin air. Without knowing where she was and where she was going, Anna staggered downhill towards where she believed Camp V must be. Anna was dead on her feet, her movements were clumsy and she was staggering – the first symptoms of altitude sickness. All she wanted was sleep. But the last remnants of reason in her brain reminded her that this would be the end. She had to move on. She had to get downhill, to the camp. At this point, there were only two things left that were driving Anna: a survival instinct as old as time and her faith.

She hadn't told her climbing companions that she was a Catholic nun. She hadn't told them her real reason for coming to Annapurna, either. She hadn't told them anything, neither about her assignment, nor about her religious order. As far as the other women were concerned, she had simply been a dependable country bumpkin with plenty of mountain experience, who didn't have much to contribute when it came to the nightly exchange of stories about men and parties. Anna had put her time to better use by enjoying the magnificent landscape, the friendly people

and the monks in saffron robes who explained Buddha's teachings to her.

Anna stopped for a moment, tried to catch her breath and mumbled a prayer. The Lord would help her. The Virgin Mary would comfort her.

After another three hundred feet, her core temperature had dropped to a mere eighty-four degrees Fahrenheit. The Nazi doctors in Dachau who experimented with ice water tanks had come to the conclusion that a human being could not survive with a core temperature of less than eighty-four degrees. On the other hand, there had been cases where children were found in the snow who had survived with a body temperature of fifty-seven degrees. However, altitude had its own laws. Anna began to cough up bloody phlegm. This, too, was a symptom of altitude sickness. After another one hundred and fifty feet, it was not her faith that was leaving her, but her strength. Anna passed out and slumped into the snow, mumbling the same prayers over and over again. She was ready to face the Virgin Mary – then she saw the monks.

The twelve figures were moving uphill, in an orderly line and secured with ropes; they were moving directly towards her. The altitude sickness blurred Anna's vision, so she didn't immediately realize that these climbers did not belong to her expedition team. There was something particularly eerie about the fact that they were not wearing the usual garish high-tech protective suits, simply brown habits like those worn by Catholic monks.

When the eerie monks reached her, Anna opened her eyes, one last time. She was surprised that they passed by without noticing that she was there. She wanted to shout something, but given the thin air, her voice failed her. Only the last two monks stopped by her side. One of them bent down and looked at her. Anna could see his face. A friendly and gentle face, even though a smile was absent. The two men examined her briefly and realized that Anna was still

alive. After exchanging a few words in Latin, they grabbed Anna under her armpits as she thanked the Virgin Mary for her rescue.

Until, that is, she noticed that the monks were not carrying her downhill – but uphill! At first, Anna thought she was hallucinating. This simply could not be happening – not uphill! But it seemed that it caused the two men in their monks' garb no great strain to haul the nun, who was half unconscious and half frozen to death, further and further uphill until finally reaching the crevasse into which Anna's companions had disappeared. Anna recognized the spot instantly. The red safety rope was still dangling over the edge; the two men dragged her to that precise point. The last thing Anna felt was a fierce blow and a piercingly cold wind in her face. Then everything around her transformed into a magnificent blend of blue and white.

II

April 29, 2011, International Space Station ISS

The problem could not have been any more serious. It could threaten the entire mission, possibly even their own lives if they didn't get it under control as soon as possible: the space toilet was defective. At 8:14 CET, the vacuum pump that collected the liquid and solid waste of the ISS crew (who had to be able to aim precisely while sitting firmly and in a particular position on the small toilet seat) broke. One hundred and ninety miles above the earth, a broken toilet is a dire problem, as rising particles of human waste represent a danger to the delicate electronic equipment on board. This was reason enough for Pawel Borowski to confront the problem. Apart from conducting a variety of biological experiments, the Jesuit priest didn't have many duties aboard the space station and was glad that he was able to use his manual dexterity to be of service to the rest of the crew.

Pawel was the first priest in space, his childhood dream had come true. In light of the planned Mars missions, and at the insistence of the Pope, NASA had finally realized that it was time to send clergy on the long journey to the Red Planet. This meant training priests to become astronauts. As soon as he heard about it, the Polish Jesuit priest with a Ph.D. in biology had immediately applied for the position and had passed the tough selection procedure, along with four other priests. Now he was in space, he of all people, Pawel Borowski, the little red-haired boy from Poznan. It's not that Pawel indulged in any illusion that here in space he was closer to his Creator than he was on earth. But before

he decided to become a servant of the Lord, he had always wanted to become an astronaut, now he was both.

The problem was that there were only a limited number of specialist tasks for priests aboard the space station. Pawel felt almost relieved that he could save the mission by repairing the toilet.

In actual fact, Pawel had a very specific task on board, but it was an assignment that he had not received from NASA; in fact, the United States Space Administration didn't even know about it. His assignment was nothing less than to protect the world against evil, just like the Archangel Michael. Pawel would never have compared himself to the Archangel Michael, even though he was well aware of the significance of his assignment on the ISS, and no one in the Church was better trained and better suited to this task than he was. Only yesterday he had used the station's sensitive antennae and electronic radar equipment, and had intercepted a signal that confirmed his worst fears. Even though the signal was weak, Pawel was able to pinpoint it on earth as the station passed over it. Right now, the computer was still analyzing the data. Pawel figured that in approximately two hours he would be able to send a compressed file through an encrypted network. This would mean that he really had saved the world, he of all people, little Pawel from Poznan. So there was no harm in using the interval to take care of a malfunctioning toilet.

Pawel was in cheerful spirits, and right in the middle of disassembling the stubborn pump in zero gravity, when the disaster occurred.

A small meteorological satellite, which had left its orbit for unknown reasons and begun spinning through space, apparently out of control, hit the space station without warning. The satellite was no bigger than a garbage can but it slammed into the space station at a speed of almost sixteen thousand miles per hour. It crashed through the wing panels of the solar arrays that spread like huge angel

wings alongside the station, shredding radial arms two through six and tearing off the Columbus Module. The force of the impact was so violent that it broke off the crew module where two crew members were sleeping. The entire station toppled to one side and began to spin, resulting in an enormous centrifugal force, which put more and more pressure on the structure of the station, so that further modules broke off. Within a few seconds, all the oxygen in the station was discharged into space and the moisture within it formed a brilliant white cloud of ice crystals around the devastated space station. Pawel didn't get the chance to marvel at the transcendental beauty of this sight. As he had not been wearing his space suit, he died instantaneously from a severe form of divers' disease. The hard vacuum in outer space made his lungs burst, and the gases that had been dissolved in his blood returned to their original gaseous condition. Abruptly, all the blood running through his veins began to bubble and foam. Every single blood vessel ruptured, with death coming almost instantly. The embolism made his brain start to swell, pushing the brainstem into the spinal canal. Simultaneously, Pawel's body was shock-frosted by the rapid drop in temperature. Only a few seconds after the impact, not a single crew member remained alive. The shattered station was spinning through space like a ghost ship, somewhere over the Indian Ocean, orbiting the earth while losing height, slowly but inexorably. In a few weeks, it would enter the atmosphere of the earth, explode into a thousand tiny pieces, and burn up like a brief meteor shower.

The electronics on board continued to work for a whopping three more days. The computer that Pawel had fed with the data to be analyzed was right on time. It produced a compressed file, but there was no one to send it down to earth. Not even the Archangel Michael.

III

Courier Online, May 1, 2011

POPE JOHN PAUL III RESIGNS!

Author: Peter Adam

Rome. During a last-minute press conference at 11:00 AM today, Vatican speaker Franco Russo announced that Pope John Paul III had resigned, effective immediately, as leader of the Catholic Church.

This extremely terse statement came as a complete surprise. Even the experienced Vatican Press Secretary was visibly struggling to maintain his composure, as it appeared he had only recently been informed of the Pope's decision.

The resignation of one of the most important religious leaders in the world is deeply unsettling, not just for the one billion plus Catholics worldwide. It will certainly result in another shake-up of the entire world order - with incalculable global consequences.

At this point, one can only speculate as to the reasons for this shocking abdication. Despite repeated and multiple questions from the assembled journalists, Russo refused to make any further comments. There were no previous indications to suggest that the Pope had tired of holding office or suffered any health issues. But Rome loves intrigue and cover-ups. Time and again there have been hushed whispers and in recent months rumors about signs of "mental weakness" in the otherwise strong and resilient Pope.

However, the succinct official statement merely stated that the Pope made his decision for "personal reasons" and that it is irrevocable. It further mentioned that the Pope will not be available for any additional comments or

interviews of any kind. As prescribed by the Law of the Apostolic Constitution, Cardinal Secretary of State Menendez, the second man in the hierarchy of the Church, also resigned immediately afterwards. The College of Cardinals – in this case, the body of Cardinals who are currently in Rome – will convene within the next few hours. During the *sede vacante* – until the election of a new pope – the Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church will serve as acting head of the Vatican.

For centuries, this process has been regulated by the Apostolic Constitution, the *Universi Dominici Gregi*. This Apostolic decree also stipulates precisely how all further proceedings are to be conducted. In principle, there is no difference between the death of a pope and his resignation. The papal seal is broken, the papal apartment is sealed, and within twenty days the conclave must begin the process of electing a new pope.

And when does it become imperative for a pope to resign? In fact, it never does. Even a pope who is seriously ill and can no longer adequately perform his official duties is not forced to resign, although it would be “a canonical nightmare”, as pointed out by Vatican expert Padre Luigi Gattuso.

Papal resignations are rare in the two-thousand-year history of the Church. Pope Gregory XII resigned in 1415 under pressure from an antipope. The only voluntary resignation was the abdication of Pope Celestine V in 1294.

One of the reasons that papal abdications are so rare may be that the role of the “former pope”, especially his role towards his successor, is not at all regulated. In general, it is assumed that a pope who has resigned will seclude himself in a monastery. Making it even more exciting to ponder what Pope John Paul III will do and whether he will distance himself completely from ecclesiastical politics.

Franz Laurenz, son of a working class family from Duisburg, Germany, was a pope who was as divisive as he was popular. His resignation comes at the worst imaginable time. Next spring, during the Third Vatican Council, he intended to introduce far-reaching reforms to the Church. Church hardliners had long regarded the “Red Pope” as much too liberal. They applauded his “Dialogue with Islam” with gritted teeth, and behind closed doors criticized his close personal relationships with high-ranking mullahs and imams. Last year, during his celebrated visit to Africa, when the athletic German Pope declared that the use of condoms would not be contradictory to Catholic beliefs, he came close to causing a major schism. At the same time, he threatened to excommunicate the Bishop of Vancouver if he continued to demand that the celibacy rule be relaxed.

Since his election to the See of Saint Peter in 2005, Franz Laurenz has polarized the factions of the Church. Nonetheless, he became a beacon of hope for many Catholics and for a renewal of the Church. At the age of sixty-two, he was one of the youngest popes ever, and he even dared to appoint Antonio Menendez his Cardinal Secretary of State, although Menendez was known to be one of his strongest critics and an ultra-conservative with close ties to *Opus Dei*. Despite that Menendez was also forced to resign according to Canon Law, many observers regard him as a favorite for the upcoming papal election.

It seems obvious that the true reasons for the resignation of John Paul III are far more complex than any alleged dementia. Clearly, a substantial power struggle is raging behind the closed doors of the Apostolic Palace.

It remains to be seen whether or not the combative “former Pope”, Laurenz, will still play a role in this struggle, and if so, to what extent. At least he still owns an apartment in Rome, the place where he used to live during his time as head of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*.

IV

May 1, 2011, Vatican City, Apostolic Palace

The folded hands on the dark wood of the prayer kneeler were well manicured. But they were not fine hands, quite the contrary. Rough, rugged and used to hard work – the hands of a laborer. In youth, they had done heavy manual labor and often had packed a punch. These hands had boxed, welded, bled and offered blessings. Hands that never seemed to rest, only in prayer. Franz Laurenz was a huge man with a masculine appearance. But when people met the Pope for the first time, invariably his hands were what impressed them the most, seeming to have a life of their own. These hands accompanied and amplified the Pope's words, grabbing and shaking them, plucking arguments like ripe pieces of fruit, squeezing them and tossing them at his interlocutors, or letting them float with unexpected grace. However, they could become wrathful, these hands. There had been instances when even the most seasoned cardinals and government leaders had winced because these hands had suddenly clenched into fists, driven by passionate outrage, and the index finger of the Pope had come down on his interlocutor like the sword of the Archangel Michael.

Those in the Pope's circle talked about his handshake, which was so strong that it could crush a horse's hoof, and about his jovial slaps on the back that could knock people off their feet. Old friends talked about his affectionate hugs, so strong as to threaten suffocation to the recipient. The head of the Vatican Gardens once confessed on *Radio Vaticano*, while laughing, that the Pope had shaken him so

forcefully, when one of the rose bushes had died, he saw visions of the Holy Virgin for three days.

However, hardly anyone knew how tender and gentle these hands could be when stroking the pages of books or ancient scrolls of parchment in the Vatican Secret Archives.

Pope John Paul III was a human being who had to touch the world in order to understand and shape it. His hands were his antennas, allowing him to connect with the feelings of mankind, and were the secret of his persuasive power.

Now these hands were folded in prayer, resting on the old prayer kneeler in the Pope's private chapel on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace, looking like huge creatures in peaceful slumber.

But the former Pope was not sleeping. He was desperately imploring his God for forgiveness. He had changed from the white papal cassock into a plain black suit and clerical collar, resembling a simple and amiable country pastor. Only the heavy golden Piscatory Ring with the papal seal on his right hand revealed that just a few hours earlier he had been one of the most powerful religious leaders in the world.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned and trespassed against you. I was not worthy of representing your kingdom. I disappointed you and all the people who believed in me. And yet, I do not see any other alternative."

Franz Laurenz's eyes looked bleary. Forsaking sleep, he had spent the night in prayer.

"Help me, Father, in this hour of hardship. Give me strength for what I must do. For the evil is waiting at our gates and there is no one to fight it."

He had been left with no other choice; he knew it immediately when he received the news from Nepal and Houston. He had no alternative, if he still wanted to find a way to prevent what he had seen coming all these years, even though he had always tried to disavow it: the

Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon, the Beast had come to open the gates of hell.

“Lord, it is my fault. I hesitated; I’ve been hesitating far too long. I was not worthy of my ministry. Father, forgive me my sins and give me the strength to confront the evil now.”

Laurenz was not a mystic. He had always interpreted the Book of Revelation not so much as a true vision, rather as an opulent and magnificent call for perseverance, directed at the early Christian congregations throughout the Roman Empire. But after everything that had happened over the previous twelve months, his opinion had changed. The Antichrist was real. He had a form and a name. His name was Seth.

However, he was unsure who was hiding behind the pseudonym of the Egyptian God of Chaos and Destruction. Although Laurenz had met the man a few times during the last year, Seth had always donned a black hooded monk’s habit, his face covered with a black silk shawl. Initially, Laurenz had not taken him seriously because of this masquerade. A grave mistake, as he now knew.

Then, last night, Laurenz had made the most painful decision of his life. Between prayers, he had completed three brief phone calls and then formatted the hard drive of his personal laptop and destroyed it. For a moment he had wondered if he should simply run, flee in secret, just vanish from the world, without a trace and forever. This would at least have given him a head start. But this was neither in his nature, nor was it his plan.

As soon as the sun rose, Laurenz freshened-up. First he fed the cat and let him free, then he called his private secretary, Alexander Duncker. Shortly afterwards, hell broke loose all around him. Duncker wasted no time in informing Menendez and only thirty minutes later they were both in his office. The Cardinal Secretary of the Vatican State yelled at him, confused and angry. Laurenz

could not blame him. They had known each other for a long time, since they had worked together in the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*. Despite the fact that they had spent their lives arguing endlessly about Church issues, and that Menendez had run against him during the conclave, publicly calling him “a danger to the Church”, Laurenz admired the Spaniard for his candor. Privately, they were even friendly towards one another. However, this did not mean that they were friends. *Au contraire*.

“Give me one sensible reason, for God’s sake!” Menendez had yelled. “One damned reason!”

“Do not swear in the name of God,” Laurenz reprimanded him.

“Don’t try to change the subject! I want to know why!”

“I can’t tell you. It’s personal.”

“Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Are you insane? Is that the reason?”

“No, Antonio, my mind is completely clear.”

The ascetic man uttered a grunt of annoyance.

“You’re giving up, that’s what this is. You have realized that your reform plans will lead to chaos and that you don’t have any answers in this time of questions. And now you’re quitting to dodge your responsibility.”

“I can empathize with how you might come to such conclusion.”

“You know what I think about your reform plans, Franz. They are poison for the Church. But I never thought you were a coward. Not until today, that is.”

Laurenz kept silent, but this infuriated Menendez even more.

“Admit it, this is just another one of your dirty little tactics,” Menendez snapped at him. “With your resignation, you are forcing me to resign as well, and then you’ll be rid of me.”

“You can become pope now, Antonio, don’t forget that.”

"You know precisely that only three Cardinal Secretaries of State have become pope in five centuries. But this is not about you or me, this is about the ministry of the Vicar of Christ on earth."

For a moment, Laurenz regretted that he and the Spaniard had never managed to become friends, a reality that could clearly be ascribed to the fact that Menendez belonged to the *Opus Dei*, the most powerful and most dangerous society within the Church.

"Do you think I don't know that? I do, believe me. But I've got to do what I've got to do."

"And what do you intend to do? Do you plan to become the *éminence grise* in the background? The Antipope?"

"Do you really think that?"

"I want to understand the reason. Why?"

Laurenz shook his head. "I am sorry, Antonio."

Filled with anger, Menendez straightened himself up. "I do not believe you, Franz Laurenz. I know you too well to believe you."

Laurenz could not help but notice that the demeanor of the Cardinal Secretary of State had changed in that he had become distant.

"You are not the kind of man who abandons everything," Menendez continued. "Overnight, so to speak. I am convinced that you have a plan and that this plan will split the Church. You named me your Secretary of State and, in so doing, you bound me to loyalty. But that's over now. From now on, I will be your fiercest enemy. I will keep an eye on you. On you and your people. I will follow your every step. I will fight you no matter what you might be doing. I will protect my church from you, so help me God."

These were his last words. The Spanish Cardinal had exited the room without saying goodbye.

The sound of someone timidly clearing his throat startled Laurenz from his deep thoughts. He ended his prayer and turned around. Duncker stood at the door of the

chapel. He was wearing a black cassock with a purple fascia, identifying him as an Honorary Prelate of His Holiness.

"It is time, Holy Father."

Laurenz nodded and stood up.

"I am no longer the Pope, Alexander. I'm not even a bishop anymore. From now on '*Reverend*' will be enough."

"With all due respect, Holy Father," Duncker replied stiffly, "as long as you wear the Ring of the Fisherman, you are the Pope and I will address you accordingly."

Laurenz understood that this was Duncker's way of expressing his disapproval of the abdication.

Unlike Menendez and all the others that Laurenz had already seen that morning to take all the necessary steps, Alexander Duncker had not yet asked him for his reasons. The Thuringian-born man had been tactful as usual when he heard the news, had arranged for the press conference, and had informed the Camerlengo, the Pope's chamberlain, who would now serve as the acting representative of the highest ranking official in the Catholic Church. At the age of forty-seven, Duncker was still very young for his important position. The good-looking Monsignore with a penchant for custom-made suits, fine restaurants and modern art was considered a heartthrob among the women of Rome, and the Italian tabloids liked to compare him to George Clooney. In public, he was gregarious and open-minded and this made him a popular talk show guest. In private, however, this highly intelligent man with an analytical brain was rather shy and reserved, and when it came to Church issues he was even extremely conservative. As a divinity student, he had contemplated joining the Carthusians, the strictest Roman Catholic religious order that demanded a commitment to almost complete silence. Laurenz, who was at the time his thesis advisor, had called him to Rome to work for the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, the body which had previously been known as

the *Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition*. One year later, he had appointed him his private secretary. He appreciated and valued Duncker's tactful nature and the smoothness with which he managed to spare him the daily grind of office routine – getting rid of people asking for interviews, answering emails, organizing secret meetings, and staying in touch with the individual bodies of the Roman Curia; and with certain other circles that operated from the shadows, controlling the fates of the world. However, what Laurenz valued most was the fact that Duncker knew how to hold his tongue. A very rare virtue in the Vatican.

“The Cardinal Camerlengo is expecting you in the reception room,” Duncker said. “Your luggage is already in the car, and the chauffeur is waiting in the courtyard. It's an inconspicuous car with a Roman license plate, exactly the way you wanted it. They are expecting you at the Abbey of Monte Cassino.”

“Very good.” Laurenz straightened himself up. “Well then, let's get it done...”

The *appartamento*, the four thousand three hundred square foot private apartment of the Pope, included not only a private chapel but also five rooms and an ample reception hall. The furnishing was simple, tasteful and expensive. Here and there a Giotto or a Tintoretto appeared on the walls from the collections of his predecessors. Amongst them some private photos of Laurenz; some of them were showing him with his parents and with his two siblings in Duisburg. Today, only his younger brother was still alive.

The papal apartment was located on the *Terza Loggia*, on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace, right next to Saint Peter's Basilica. On the second floor were various government offices of the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy See, and on the floor above, right under the roof, was the apartment of the private secretary of the Pope. The roof

of the Apostolic Palace had a huge garden terrace and Laurenz had loved to spend time there – especially in the evening – enjoying the view over the Eternal City.

“Please do me a favor, Alexander,” Laurenz said with a sigh. “Please deliver me from your indignant silence.”

Duncker stopped abruptly and took a deep breath. “You will have your reasons, Holy Father. For your abdication as well as for your silence. This is something I have to respect.”

Laurenz put his hand on the shoulder of his secretary. “I would like to thank you, Alexander. For everything. May I ask you for one last favor?” Laurenz pulled a small air-cushioned envelope from his coat pocket. On the envelope was an address outside of Rome written in the typical handwriting of the Pope, in neat block letters, which looked as if they had been carved into the paper. “Would you deliver this letter on my behalf? By hand? Right now?”

Laurenz put the envelope into Duncker’s hands as if it were fragile and precious. Then he held Duncker’s hands between his.

“It would be best if you took the helicopter.”

Duncker cast a glance at the address on the envelope and raised one of his eyebrows.

“That’s against the rules.”

“That’s why I am asking you for a favor.”

“May I ask what is in the envelope?”

Instead of giving him an answer, Laurenz just looked at him, steadfastly. A look as heavy as a rock. With a sigh, Duncker put the letter away.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Holy Father?”

“No. That was it. God bless you, Alexander.”

Cardinal Giovanni Sacchi was already waiting for the Pope in the reception hall. Until the Middle Ages, the papal chamberlain had been in charge of the fiscal administration of the Holy See. In the meantime, the Camerlengo was left with only one task: to keep the office of the pope during the

sede vacante, usually following the pope's death. Part of this task was to destroy the signet ring of the deceased pope and to seal his private apartments. He would then hold the highest office in the Church until the new pope was elected.

Sacchi was a grumpy and tight-lipped man in his late seventies. He had spent almost his entire life in the Vatican and he had seen a lot, at times too much, so that he was used to not asking many questions. To him it made no difference whether the Pope had died or resigned; his task remained identical. Silently, he took the Ring of the Fisherman as it was handed to him, and equally silently he locked it away in a small box. Within the next few hours he would crush the ring with a silver hammer in the presence of the College of Cardinals.

One last time, Laurenz glanced around the room which had become so familiar to him during the past five years. He would never see any of this again in this life, and he would not need any of it.

Laurenz looked at his watch. Eleven-forty AM. It was time. High time. He turned to the Camerlengo. "Would you allow me a last moment in private, Cardinal Camerlengo?"

"Of course, Reverend," the Camerlengo replied.

The Camerlengo had barely left the room when Laurenz rushed through a door at the far side into his study and from there into the library, which contained the most valuable and precious editions of his nearly twenty thousand books. Like every other room of the *appartamento*, the library had a phone, a modern telephone with a secure line, which stood on a Baroque writing table. But Laurenz suppressed the impulse to make a final call. Everything was prepared. Everything else was in God's hands.

For a brief moment, Laurenz was simply standing there bidding farewell to his private library, his beloved refuge. He inhaled the familiar scent one final time, a blend of old

paper, leather, floor wax and bygone times. Then Laurenz opened the only window in the room and, without wasting another thought, he climbed down the narrow fire escape leading into the shadowy courtyard, hoping that the employees of the Palace were all so overwhelmed by the events of the last hours that they were too busy and too distracted to cast a glance out of the window. He also hoped that the cat had found his way.

Two minutes later, Laurenz stood next to a Lieutenant of the Swiss Guards, who was wearing a dark suit instead of his traditional and flashy Renaissance uniform. It was quiet down here in the small courtyard; there was hardly any noise, only the distant gurgling of a fountain. The irresistible scent of bacon and tomato sauce wafted from somewhere in the distance, the classic Roman *pasta all'amatriciana*, one of Laurenz's favorite dishes. But Laurenz knew how deceptive the peaceful ambience and the warm May air were. The news of his abdication was already surging through the world like a tsunami. St. Peter's Square had begun to fill with distraught believers and curious onlookers; the media was moving in with fleets of broadcasting vans and the paparazzi had rented helicopters and were swarming the rooftops around the Vatican; the cell phone networks surrounding the Vatican were collapsing with the government leaders of the biggest industrial nations already consulting each other in a panic.

Laurenz turned to the Lieutenant of the Swiss Guards.

"Do you have them?"

"Of course, Holy Father."

The guard handed Laurenz two keys. One of them was an old skeleton key with a gray plastic label that was marked with a single word in block letters: PASSETTO.

V

May 1, 2011, Vatican City

H*atred is good. Pain is good. Hatred and pain are heavenly brothers, the divine energy of the soul, the source of the light. The light forged you from hatred and made you its instrument, your mission to sow pain. You are the second apocalyptic horseman, the warrior in red armor. The light has sent you out to cleanse the world through bloodshed, death and war. This is exactly what you are going to do.*

Nikolas pressed himself into the shadows of an ancient oak tree and observed the private secretary of the Pope as he hurried across the *Campo Santo Teutonico*, the German cemetery. Nikolas himself was not in a hurry. He knew precisely where the man in the black cassock was headed.

You are the instrument of the light. Through the brotherhood, the light revealed to you your divine mission, and taught you that hatred and pain are good and that they are one. But it also taught you that you may only appear in a cunning disguise in this depraved and sinful world, if you do not want to jeopardize your mission.

The private secretary crossed the square in front of the Palace of Justice and disappeared behind the building. Nikolas stepped out of the shadows and followed him. Still he did not particularly hurry, but his strides were long enough to catch-up with the man just before he reached his destination.

The brotherhood has taught you to hide your hatred. It has not even been difficult. Everyone who gets to know you in your worldly disguise praises your friendliness, your modesty, your willingness to help, and sometimes even your

charm. The brotherhood taught you all this. Everything you know and everything you are you owe to the brotherhood. And now the time has come to show your gratefulness to the holy brotherhood by helping to accomplish the great work.

The time of the light has come.

On the right side behind the Palace of Justice were the Vatican Gardens with the building that housed the Governorate of Vatican City. Nikolas noticed, however, that the private secretary passed the Palace on the left side, rushing past the church *Santo Stefane degli Abissini*, and so he increased his speed. He caught-up with the man as planned, shortly before he reached the *helicopterum portum*, the papal heliport, which had been built in 1976 at the behest of Pope Paul VI. The *Sikorsky SH-3D "Sea King"* was ready for take-off, waiting on the reinforced concrete slab by the north wall of the Vatican. Still walking, the private secretary signaled to the pilot to start the engine. This was the moment when Nikolas called to him from behind.

"Monsignore! One moment please!"

The private secretary turned. Nikolas enjoyed the irritated look on the face of the man, obviously annoyed by this unknown priest who tried to keep him from his urgent mission.

Prepare yourself. Tame your temper. Pain you shall sow and light you shall reap. Yours is the kingdom and the light and the glory.

"What do you want from me?" the private secretary seemed edgy and angry.

"In the name of the light," Nikolas said in a gentle voice and then he pulled the machete from his cassock and in a single trained motion he rammed it deep into the priest's head.

The priest's face burst open like a ripe mango. His blood splattered onto Nikolas's cassock as he collapsed to the