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A VATICAN SECRET ARCHIVES THRILLER

GARY MCAVOY  
RONALD L. MOORE

# THE AVIGNON AFFAIR

VATICAN SECRET ARCHIVE THRILLERS  
BOOK FOUR

GARY MCAVOY  
RONALD L. MOORE



LITERATI  
EDITIONS®

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# PROLOGUE

AVIGNON, FRANCE – 14TH CENTURY

**B**elieved to be suffering from terminal lupus, in April 1314 Pope Clement V lay on his deathbed in Avignon, the recently established seat of the Holy Roman Church.

Bertrand Raymond de Got—the French Archbishop of Bordeaux who had taken the regnal name Clement V when he was crowned pope in June 1305—had largely assumed St. Peter’s Chair through King Philip IV’s influence, having bound himself to the French monarch before his elevation as Christ’s vicar on earth. And with Philip’s encouragement, Clement—disinclined to face the violent chaos in Rome after his election—insisted that the papacy be moved to Avignon, which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. Thus was established the first pope in Avignon rather than Rome in what was later known as the Babylonian captivity of the papacy.

His body swollen and agonized, knowing death loomed close, he summoned his brother, Cardinal Florian de Got, for one final but important assignment. At his bedside lay two rolled parchment scrolls bound by hemp.

“Florian,” the pope rasped, “I am not long for this world. God forgive me, but I must confess to you that I have amassed a great fortune during my papacy, and I am leaving it to you alone. The treasure is safely hidden, and I will disclose to you how to find its location when you return from handling one final burden I must ask you to assume.

“Those scrolls, the ones on the table. They are most valuable, and terribly dangerous in the wrong hands. I want you to take them to Notre-Dame immediately. Give them to the archbishop there. He will know what to do. The scrolls are not safe here in Avignon, especially if Philip should name my successor, someone not of my own choosing. Should the king see the confessions in one of the documents, he will hardly be able to contain his wrath.”

The young French monarch ruled his kingdom with a silver tongue and an iron fist. Known as Philip the Fair for his handsome features, he was anything but when it came to governing his empire, something Clement knew only too well.

Philip had been only seventeen years old when the crown passed to him on the death of his father. Plagued by fiscal deficits owing to the many wars he either inherited or incited—most notably with Aragon, England and Flanders—Philip was deeply in debt to both the Jewish merchants of Lombardy and the Knights Templar, the latter of whom established international banking much as it operates in modern times.

In a shrewd maneuver of fiscal handiwork, Philip expelled all the Jews from France and confiscated their property, including several Jewish silver mints, thereby not only gaining substantial wealth in the process, but also escaping repayment of his debt to them.

Not content with that, he had convinced Pope Clement V to free him of his great debt to the Templar monastic order by

claiming the movement was a state unto itself and abolishing it entirely.

The contents of the scrolls Clement now handed to his brother could incite wrath from Philip against both Clement and his family.

“Make haste, dear brother, for when I die, I cannot guarantee your safety. You will travel incognito, dressed in bishop’s clothing to avoid Philip’s troops who are watching for papal envoys. And I shall provide you with an official bishop’s escort, so you will be well received as such. Now go, and may God’s grace be with you.”

Cardinal Florian de Got left Avignon shortly afterward—not as a prince of the Church nor the brother of the pope, but as a mere bishop. Unfortunately, he died during the difficult eight-hundred-kilometer journey to Paris, with the hidden scrolls sewn securely into the sleeve of his right arm.

Uncertain what to do, his entourage—who themselves were unaware of their master’s true identity—dutifully proceeded on to Paris carrying the body of the presumed bishop for the rectors at Notre-Dame to deal with.

AS THE GREAT cathedral of Notre-Dame was in the final stages of its construction—now some one hundred and ten years after it began—Jerome Baudette, the esteemed Bishop of Bordeaux who succeeded Bertrand de Got, had paid handsomely to be interred in the foundation of the grand cathedral at such time as he passed away. This privilege was granted to a rare few and was largely contingent on their recipients’ influence in the Church, not to mention the tithings they pledged to secure their crypts.

As it happened, Baudette was attending a conference of European bishops in Lisbon, Portugal, when he took ill and

shortly afterward died. It was decided that his body would be taken by ship from Lisbon up to the French port of Le Havre, and from there down the Seine River to Paris and his final resting place at Notre-Dame, according to his wishes.

But those wishes were never to be realized. The English ship carrying Baudette's body, the *Shoreham*, sank during a ferocious storm in the Celtic Sea off the coast of France. There were no survivors, and Baudette's casket plunged to the ocean floor.

By sheer happenstance, Florian de Got's body had arrived at Notre-Dame in Paris at the same time that Bishop Baudette's corpse had been expected. And since no one yet knew of the shipwreck, and this man was dressed in bishop's attire, the rectors assumed he was the venerable Bishop of Bordeaux, and they interred him in Baudette's prearranged crypt deep in the catacombs beneath the cathedral, dressed just as he had been when he arrived, with the secret scrolls still hidden inside his sleeve.

POPE CLEMENT V died many days later, and eight months after that, King Philip died in a hunting accident at the age of forty-six. His three sons each took their turns as king, but none of them lasted long and died relatively young themselves. Ultimately, the throne passed to his nephew, Philip, Count of Valois, head of the Capetian House of Valois.

Avignon served as the seat of the Holy Roman Church for the next sixty-seven years and home to seven popes, all of them French.



## NOTRE-DAME CATHEDRAL

## THE AVIGNON AFFAIR

### **PARIS, FRANCE** **PRESENT DAY**

A CHARRED LATTICE of ten-meter oaken trusses, roughly-hewn from their original construction between the years 1163 to 1260, had toppled onto the floor of the great cathedral during the accidental fire of April 2019, which was likely linked to restoration work taking place in the spire at the time.

Some three years later, the oak beams still lay where they had fallen, while a team of archeologists and forensic specialists combed through the debris, seeking what could still be salvaged from the ruins as the interior underwent extensive cleaning.

In a surprise discovery, a fourteenth-century lead sarcophagus had been found in an excavated crypt just beneath the cathedral floor. And ground-penetrating radar used to determine the stability of the underlying floor revealed an even older pit, one likely dating as far back as 1230, when the cathedral was undergoing its original construction.

But once excavators cleared out the centuries-old detritus in that lower pit, they made another stunning discovery: beneath thick layers of dirt and the ample offscourings of time lay an ancient crypt obviously buried beneath subsequent construction that occurred over many hundreds of years. Clearly it held someone of prominence, for the crypt was elaborately fashioned. But strangely, there was no apparent indication of the identity of the person whose remains lay within.

When the crypt was later opened and the tightly sealed coffin disinterred, forensics specialists determined the person to have been a distinguished religious figure, noting that the ornate garments covering the body were in surprisingly good condition given the sealed crypt's apparent age.

But examiners discovered peeking through the thinning



fabric a flat, tightly rolled set of parchment scrolls apparently sewn into the garment's sleeve with embroidered threads of gold, and with the hemp cord surrounding it having bonded to the paper itself. It would take extreme caution to separate the hemp from the scrolls for later analysis.

The Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Anton Gauthier, was consulted as to the disposition of the scrolls. Considering their fragility and likely esteemed provenance, the cardinal decided this matter would best be handled by the archival specialists at the Vatican. He summoned Father Michael Dominic, prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives, to oversee the extraction and analysis.

But as it happened, Father Dominic had already received another official invitation to be in Paris at the same time.

## CHAPTER ONE

**A**t eighty-nine, the First Lady of France, Jacquelin Valois, was dead. Her hearse, a vintage black 1960s Citroën, began the slow funeral cortège from Élysée Palace to the Hôtel national des Invalides, some twenty minutes distant.

A Mass for two hundred family members, close friends and select dignitaries was planned at Dôme des Invalides, the former royal military chapel in the revered complex of buildings honoring the military history of France. Jacquelin Valois had been a fierce advocate for disabled war veterans, prompting her husband—a highly honored war hero himself—to push parliament to enact legislation supporting expanded benefits and retirement facilities for veterans of the French Republic.

Surrounded by a phalanx of security personnel lining both sides of the barricaded streets—vacant save for the massive mourning crowds bordering the procession route—Jacquelin’s husband of fifty-seven years, French President Pierre Valois, walked behind the hearse with his two sons, Philip and

Lauren. Tears streamed down Pierre's and Lauren's faces each time they looked up at the tricolor-flag-covered coffin, while Philip remained stoic, glancing at his watch as he walked slowly down the Champs-Élysée.

That both sons had been appointed roles in their father's administration had been a sensitive subject for the French people, with modest catcalls of nepotism in the press and among opposition political parties as both sons were perceived as riding on their respected father's coattails. Now in his fourth and likely final term—for he was a sprightly ninety-two himself now—Pierre Valois deftly handled dissent on the matter from within his own party and, owing to his reputation as one of France's favorite sons, few others spoke up against his decisions.

Helping matters was the fact that both sons performed their respective duties capably, if not admirably—at least in the view of their party's supporters. As Minister of the Interior, Philip oversaw all law enforcement and public safety agencies in the country: an exceedingly powerful position equivalent to the United Kingdom's Home Secretary or the United States' Secretary of Homeland Security and Attorney General combined. He also was formally consulted on the appointment of Catholic diocesan bishops throughout the French Republic, a role giving him significant influence in relations with the Vatican.

As Minister of Culture, Philip's younger brother Lauren attended to the country's cultural heritage, including historical landmarks, national parks, museums and galleries. While his was not as inherently powerful a position as his older brother's, Lauren was perfectly suited to the job, hobnobbing with the rich and powerful whose philanthropic impulses could be of tremendous value to his own political maneuvering. The arts being a historically significant standard of French culture,

Lauren had his finger on the pulse of the country and knew which ways the winds were blowing—and he wasn't opposed to pointing his sails to take advantage of those winds.

The two brothers were usually at odds with one another as they fought for their father's attention. Many of Lauren's pursuits had escaped his father's attention, and Pierre considered his younger son a bit foppish and flamboyant, a darling of the art crowd. Lauren was closer to his mother in that regard, for her patronage of the arts was just one of the many reasons she was considered a national treasure by the French people.

While Pierre Valois loved both his sons, it was clear to Lauren that his father favored Philip in nearly all ways. For Lauren, his mother's death was the loss of a grounding influence. For Philip, it was merely an unexpected inconvenience.

For Pierre, though, Jacquelin's passing was a sorrowful milestone in his long life, and he knew his own time was coming sooner than later. He had been in and out of hospitals of late, battling a series of conditions he'd kept discreetly hidden from the public.

Only he and his personal physicians knew that he was dying.



AT THE OFFICIAL reception held in the Élysée Palace, Pierre and his sons greeted friends and dignitaries who had come to pay their last respects. Apart from pandering cabinet ministers and others who sought political favor with their appearance, notable among the guests were Baron Armand de Saint-Clair—one of Pierre's closest friends who had served with him during World War II—and Hana Sinclair, the baron's granddaughter and Pierre's goddaughter, who was escorted by the decorated French *Béret Vert* Marco Picard in full dress uniform.

Behind them in the receiving line was the pope's personal representative from the Vatican, Father Michael Dominic, who had known the Valois family through Enrico Petrini's—now Pope Ignatius'—close friendship with Pierre. Though he would have preferred to have been there himself, the pope knew his presence would disrupt the solemn occasion for his dear friend, but on hearing of Jacquelin's death, had consoled Pierre for some time by phone.

The solemn funeral cortège and the dignified reception were marred only by a sizable number of protestors kept distant by the Police Nationale, forces under the direction of the Interior Ministry. Owing to burdensome fiscal policies and the surge of refugees from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, bands of frustrated young Frenchmen—out of work, hungry and angry, roaming the streets of Paris looking for trouble, especially during an official state function—had been forced to protest several blocks away from the government palace.

Aware of the volatile political climate before sending Father Dominic to Paris, Pope Ignatius insisted that the priest be accompanied by one of his most loyal Swiss Guards, Sergeant Karl Dengler. As the two already were close friends, Michael Dominic didn't mind the company, though he balked at needing protection at all, since he had visited Paris often for both Church business and to visit his longtime friend Hana Sinclair.

Dressed in a dark plainclothes suit, Karl Dengler mingled with other security details lining the Grande Salle des Fêtes, the official banquet hall in the west wing of Élysée Palace. Looking out the window, in the distance he could see the protestors now becoming more agitated, gathering around the tall Egyptian obelisk at the Place de la Concorde just off the Champs-Élysée. It was clear the crowd was growing larger as more people—mostly young masked men—joined the fracas.

The Swiss Guard was only mildly concerned, given the strong police blockades lining the barriers, but he instinctively shrugged and settled his shoulder to ensure his holstered SIG Sauer was readily available.

Looking back to the packed grand salon, Karl saw Marco Picard making his way toward him through the well-dressed crowd. Marco had been employed by Hana's grandfather some time ago to guard his granddaughter after an attempt on her life. As Karl and others knew, their relationship had grown from bodyguard and charge to something more over time.

“Bonjour, *mon ami*,” Marco said as he shook the young *gardist*'s hand. The two had been bodyguards for Hana and Michael in the past, enjoying many hours and much action together as they stood by their charges. “It’s good to see you again, Karl. I assume you’re here as Father Michael’s escort?”

“I am, yes. The pope asked for me personally, and he’s kind of a hard man to turn down. Besides, though I love Vatican City, it’s good to leave it from time to time. Life there can be a little confining, if you know what I mean.” Both men turned to the tall, arched windows to observe the protests down the long boulevard.

Sensing Karl’s disquiet as he watched the disturbance, Marco offered, “I wouldn’t worry too much about those *déca-dents*. The National Police have them under control. France is well known for its anarchists, especially black bloc ideologues who oppose authority and capitalism. But then, revolution is in our blood.” He laughed as if it were an inside joke. Karl just kept staring out the window, unamused.

Turning back to the guests, he noticed an intriguing couple talking with Father Dominic: a tall, aristocratic gentleman wearing a blue satin sash across his chest with a cluster of military decorations pinned over his heart, and on his arm a striking woman of regal bearing sporting a sleek, black Dior

skirt suit with a large, broad-brimmed black hat and a conspicuous Jardin Mystérieux cultured pearl and diamond necklace that drew attention to her ample endowments.

“Who are those people talking to Michael?” Karl asked. “They look like royalty.”

Marco’s head turned to the trio across the room. “*Oui*, they are *la noblesse*, nobles of royal blood. That is His Grace Jean-Louis Micheaux, the Duke of Avignon, with his wife, Duchess Sabine. The duke is believed to have his eye on the presidency when Valois retires, which is quietly expected soon in certain circles. But he will be up against a strong opponent, for the Defense Minister, André Bélanger, is also known to covet the job. If you ask me, Bélanger would be a catastrophe. He is a hardline conservative calling for a return to traditional values, and a repugnant xenophobic nationalist to boot. Nor does he care for people of your stripe, my friend.”

“Homophobic, eh?” Karl muttered discreetly. “I hope he loses by a landslide.”

“On the other hand, Duke Jean-Louis Micheaux is an ardent supporter of liberal issues and is more inclined to give the people what they want: more-generous government support, shorter working hours and higher salaries, sexual freedoms, and a welcoming hand to those seeking refuge—to the extreme by some standards. There is a distinct clash of cultures between these two men, and you see both sides playing out across France now. It should be an interesting election when that time comes.

“But,” Marco continued, “the man to keep an eye on is Philip Valois, the president’s elder son. He, too, is a hardliner and has close relations with Bélanger. Look at him,” Marco nodded to the Interior Minister huddled with the Defense Minister in a far corner, “he is little more than a scheming power monger, and a scoundrel at that. I’m sure the two are

taking bets now on how long Philip's father has left to live. I do not trust the man."

Just then, Michael and Hana emerged from the crowd and headed for the window where Marco and Karl were standing.

"Hey," Hana said, smiling as she reached for Marco's hand, "what are you two scheming over here? Looks like a serious discussion."

Marco leaned down to kiss her forehead. "We were just discussing the political dynamics of the room. You did not miss anything, *ma chérie*, just idle chatter."

"I had a fascinating conversation with the Duke and Duchess of Avignon," Michael said. "Really nice people, though she's quite the firecracker. It's clear who wears the pants in the Micheaux family. I imagine Duchess Sabine is a force to be reckoned with, and I'm not sure I'd want to tangle with her. But I really liked Jean-Louis. Do you know them, Marco?"

Marco was pensive for a moment, crafting a proper response.

"Who doesn't? They are well-known all over France. But I can't say I know them all that well personally. And I do not like his politics. He seems to want to buy his popularity with free this, government-fund that. Some days I feel like I'm supporting myself and a bunch of strangers, and right now, France has more strangers than it can afford. But he would open the doors even wider.

"And yes, I agree with you on the duchess. Keep an eye on that one. She is known as one of France's leading social influencers. She has a tremendous following on the internet. Always dresses in black. She considers herself the queen of French fashion and culture, and as you may have seen, her image appears frequently on billboards and magazine covers. She even calls herself a queen: *La Reine Noire*. The Black Queen."



## CHAPTER TWO

The wide streets of Paris from Élysée Palace south to Montparnasse Cemetery had been cleared of traffic as the funeral procession made its way to Jacqueline Valois' final resting place.

The motorcade had taken a circuitous route to bypass the protestors gathered at Place de la Concorde, but it was clear that, with their rapidly growing numbers, the agitators had begun to spread out even down into the 14th Arrondissement where the ancient cemetery rested. Apparently, wide media coverage of both events had incited more provocateurs to join the fray, and many of them mingled among the legitimate mourners lining the route.

The cemetery grounds at Montparnasse had been encircled with barricades by the National Police with the assistance of the city's local gendarmerie, and the Interior Ministry had deployed a Quick Reaction Force to stand by in case extreme measures were needed to protect the dignitaries. Security was tight.

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The motorcade of limousines and black sedans was led by police motorcycle escorts through the narrow cobblestone lanes to the Valois family's burial crypt, where the First Lady's casket had already been placed for final interment. The tricolor flag of France lay draped across the coffin, and a six-man cadre of honor guards stood at attention on either side of it.

As a smaller group of a hundred or so family members and select guests were taking their seats for the memorial service, Marco and Karl stood back with the other protective security details, all of whom were cautiously surveying the outer perimeter of the cemetery. Despite the barricades and police presence, some three hundred protestors surrounded the grounds, and they were rapidly being joined by others.

Marco walked up to one of the other security people standing next to Philip Valois' limousine. "Bonjour, Bruno. Have you got any intel on these demonstrators? Clearly, their numbers are growing. Should we be concerned?"

Bruno, the beefy six-foot-four bodyguard and chauffeur for the Interior Minister, glanced down at Marco with disdain. He paused a moment, his hand pressed against his coiled earpiece as he listened to chatter from other colleagues. Then he responded.

"I was informed by ministry officials that there is some online chatter about those *connards* initiating a disturbance, but it is nothing we cannot handle ourselves. Just keep your eyes on your own man, Picard."

*What's with him?* thought Marco as he coldly turned away. *Bâtard grossier...*

He looked for Armand, Hana and Michael among the mourners, took note of their positions beneath the large, white, open tent canopy erected for the service, then turned back to Karl.

“I’d like you to stay with the car, *mon ami*, and keep the engine running as a precaution. No telling yet how this is going to play out. Hopefully, it’s a quick ceremony.” Despite wearing aviator shades, he held up his hand to shield his eyes from the glaring overhead sun, again surveying the demonstrators surrounding the cemetery. He noted that many wore distinctive yellow neon vests—the kind French drivers are legally obliged to carry in their vehicles for roadside emergencies—but which also are popular among French activists, who earned the label “Yellow Jackets” as a known collective of hostile provocateurs. Marco could easily hear their shouting and cursing from where he stood, which was too close for his comfort. Even peaceful crowds can be dangerous, but when politically frenzied—as these people obviously were—the threat level increased substantially.

As Cardinal Anton Gauthier, the archbishop of Paris, was reading verses from Scripture to the assembled guests, the service seemed to be going smoothly when Marco noticed Sabine Micheaux look at her watch, then reach for her husband’s hand as they both stood up and walked quietly but with purpose to their waiting Peugeot 607 Paladine limousine. As if by prearrangement, the chauffeur had already pulled the vehicle out of line and was idling in the access lane, waiting for the duke and duchess. He got out of the limo and opened both doors for them, then drove south, away from where most of the demonstrators had gathered and out onto Rue Froidevaux, where the limo merged into Parisian traffic.

Then, suddenly, a loud “BOOM” in the distance shook the mourners. Everyone was startled by the commotion, which was followed by more thunderous sounds and clouds of tear gas descending where most of the demonstrators had assembled.

Now on full alert, Marco homed in on the quickly esca-

lating action not far from the funeral service. The number of protestors had grown significantly, outnumbering the police forces who were using batons and shields against a swarm of people wearing double pairs of black denim jeans, combat boots, layered hoodies, elbow and knee pads and thick leather gloves. Many were equipped with black bicycle helmets, mirrored sunglasses and respirators. Clearly, the rabble had been expecting the use of rubber bullets, pepper spray and tear gas.

And in a flash, they were overrunning police lines and jumping over the barricades, heading for the group of dignitaries with presumably nefarious purpose.

Instinctively, Marco and most of the other security specialists drew their weapons and raced across the cemetery, weaving through the headstones, to fetch their protectees from under the large white canopy some distance away. Karl had moved their rented Range Rover out into the lane, ready to take off when Marco returned with the others and gave the order.

A swarm of Yellow Jackets and black bloc protestors had already raced to where the dignitaries were assembled, while most of the esteemed guests were still seated in frozen disbelief, shocked that this could actually be happening at all. One of the protestors produced a large dagger and expertly cut through one of the lines holding up the tent, which partially collapsed over the people still seated there. Pandemonium reigned; people started screaming.

Michael Dominic reflexively drew Hana close to him, protecting as much of her body as he could as he gathered her grandfather Armand as well while trying to find a route of escape from beneath the nylon canopy, which had now collapsed over everyone after the other tethering lines had been cut.

“I’ve got you,” Michael assured her confidently. “We’ll be

out of this soon.” She leaned into him without question, accepting his guidance and protection.

Meanwhile, Marco had just reached the collapsed tent and the covered crowd of mourners. Lifting one of the sides near to where he knew his charges to be sitting, he saw Michael was protecting Hana, then found and put his arm around Armand, shielding him with his own body.

“Michael!” he shouted. “Follow me!”

The priest pulled Hana with him as he kept lifting the canopy behind Marco and Armand to reach the side of it and escape from the smothering white nylon. They could hear gunshots outside the tent, which Marco assumed—or at least hoped—were warning shots from the detail of security personnel guarding the French president and his family.

Having finally escaped from beneath the canopy, all four ran through the graveyard, dodging the multitude of gravestone monuments, until they reached the Range Rover. As they piled in, Marco shouted to Karl, “Go! Now!” and the SUV raced away from the scene, over which clouds of tear gas were now billowing.

“Are you okay?” Michael asked Hana as she settled herself in the back seat, his arm still holding her tightly.

“Yes, but a bit shaken. I can’t believe what just happened! What was that all about? Grand-père?”

At 92 years of age, Armand seemed remarkably calm considering the circumstances. “Yes, my dear, I’m fine. Just dispirited that this great and proud country has fallen to such mayhem.”

Marco, adrenaline still coursing through him, leapt to respond angrily. “I’ve dealt with a lot of demonstrations over the years, but nothing so outrageously bold as that. I am shocked they were allowed to get as close to the president as

they did. Someone's head will roll for such a reprehensible fiasco, and it's likely to be the president's own son, Philip Valois'. He's in charge of the National Police, who apparently were not prepared for that kind of excessive protest. Those people meant business. And it was obviously well organized, not random at all."

There was a moment's pause until Karl spoke up.

"Did anyone else see the duke and duchess get up and leave while the ceremony was still in progress? And it was just minutes before all hell broke loose. Don't you find that odd?"

"I didn't notice, but then, they were sitting behind us," Hana said. "Maybe they had a prior engagement."

"Yes, I saw that, too," Marco said, a pensive note to his voice. "Seems an unusual breach of protocol, not to mention courtesy, especially for the funeral of the First Lady of France with the president in attendance. But as they were sitting behind him, he likely missed it as well. *Alors, la noblesse...* they have their own standards of conduct."

Michael's adrenaline had him on edge. "After all that excitement, I need to get a run in before dinner. Karl, you up for joining me?"

"You bet I am. I could burn off some energy, too."

"So," Michael wondered to the group, "where are we staying tonight?"

"I've put you up at the Park Hyatt Paris Vendôme, far away from the demonstrations," Armand replied. "With my compliments, of course, I insist. But shall we have supper together later, say, eight o'clock? I suggest the Pur' - Jean-François Rouquette, which is conveniently located in the hotel. A superb restaurant, I might add, and dinner will also be on my account there."

"Great! I've actually stayed there before, for a conference a

couple of years ago,” Michael said. “Baron, you’re too good to us.”

“Nonsense, my boy. You took fine care of my granddaughter back there. It is the least I can do.”

Marco shifted uncomfortably in the front passenger seat, but remained silent as he watched the road ahead.

## CHAPTER THREE

After checking in at the Park Hyatt, Michael and Karl went to their rooms to change into running gear. Before heading to the elevator, the priest had asked the hotel concierge for a map and route that might circumvent the demonstrators. Well aware of the city's protests, she happily provided him with a safe, five-kilometer jogging circuit.

As they emerged from the hotel entrance into the long, twilight shadows of sundown, both men were grateful they'd brought windbreakers, for the autumn air was brisk but invigorating. They started off heading down Rue Danielle Casanova which, after branching out onto Avenue de l'Opéra, took them down toward the Seine, where they ran along the peaceful bank of the flowing river.

Michael had much on his mind. Having recently confessed to his life's mentor—who also happened to be Pope Ignatius—that he was in love with Hana, he had been consumed with thoughts of the different futures potentially awaiting some kind of decision on his part.



Of course, that decision was not entirely up to him. There would be no point in leaving the priesthood for a woman who did not share his feelings. He knew he needed to talk to her about this, but from a certain standpoint, he was afraid to. Either answer she might give had serious implications for his future, and he was not sure he wanted to face either of them. If she professed her love for him, was he ready to leave the priesthood? If she did not share his same feelings, where did that leave him? There was a certain peace in not knowing. He could just continue for a while with things the way they were, and not have to face a serious decision that could reshape the rest of his life. He just wasn't self-assured enough to make a decision of that magnitude.

On the other hand, he could not let it go on forever. Not making a decision was a decision in itself, just one that was the coward's way out. No, he would have to face it at some point, and soon. That was only fair to Hana. But before he spoke to her, he needed to know his own heart, and right now he just wasn't sure. There was an authentic bliss to being a priest, and he enjoyed a coveted position within the Church. His work in the Vatican Apostolic Archive provided untold treasures of knowledge and had propelled him into several adventures already. What other untold secrets in the Archives could be waiting for him?

But there were periods when the cloistered and silent halls and rooms of the Archives whispered only loneliness, and his mind drifted to those few precious times when he and Hana had shared moments of intimate closeness. They had only kissed once, but the memory of that incident still burned in his mind. Her touch was electric. He longed to hold her. To protect her. To be with her. He couldn't deny those feelings, but did they mean he had to act on them? Or, like so many priests before him, must he learn to control and suppress those feel-

ings, not just for himself, but for the sake of those people he served, and for the Church?

Dare he speak of this to Karl? To share the burden and gain some kind of insight from a close friend? As they ran in silence—the cadence of their breathing and their rhythmic footsteps—the only sounds—he decided to chance it. After all, Karl had come out to him on their first run together two years earlier, and they had developed a strong bond since.

“I’m in love with your cousin,” he blurted out as his gaze was turned to one of the ships passing up the river.

“Yeah, me too,” the young Swiss Guard said, laughing and shaking his head. “She’s an amazing woman.”

“No. I...I meant it in a different way, Karl. I really *do* love her.” As he repeated the words, Michael suddenly seized up, feeling dizzy and nauseous. His pace slowed until he began walking in tight circles, breathing heavily, his hands resting on his hips. His eyes teared up as he looked at his friend. “And...I don’t know what to do about it...”

Karl had stopped as well, now looking at the priest in a different light.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Michael looked away, largely to keep his emotions in check, then took a couple of deep breaths. Turning back to Karl, he laid out the truth of his longtime desire, including the spontaneous forbidden kiss that occurred in the dim light of the underground Archives several months earlier, and the obvious dilemma he now faced.

“Am I crazy to even be talking like this? I figured you’re the only one I can turn to. What do I do?”

“Do you know if she feels the same way?”

“That’s just it—I don’t know! And if I did, and she shared my feelings, well, what then? Leaving the priesthood doesn’t seem like an option, and yet I can’t have it both ways.”

“If only the Church were more enlightened on this issue, not to mention situations like mine, where I have to keep my own relationship with Lukas secret. It isn’t fair, and the rules are archaic. But, they’re still the rules, Michael. We either choose to keep to them or not.”

“If I only knew how she really felt about me, it might make a decision easier. Has she ever mentioned anything to you?”

Karl rolled his eyes and put his hand on Michael’s shoulder. “My friend, she’s smarter than that. I know she cares about you, like we all do, but she’d never come out and actually say how she feels in that way—especially since you’re a priest! She barely even mentions how she feels about Marco.”

“And there’s that, too. I’d hate to come between Marco and Hana if there was something special there—which I don’t really sense in a more meaningful way, I might add. It’s just a feeling, though I’m not sure I can trust my own judgment on that. God help me...”

“Why don’t you just ask her? That’s the simplest way to know for sure, don’t you think?”

The priest froze. “Sure. Just ask her. Why didn’t I think of that?” he deadpanned.

“Well, let’s burn off this energy with a few more kilometers. All the more reason to run!” Karl laughed at the double meaning as he picked up the pace, with Michael catching up.

“This isn’t over, you know.”

“Yeah. I know. But you’ll figure something out.”