

The Sacred Blood

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‘Today you come with me, Aaron,’ Mordecai Cohen whispered, motioning for his son to stand. He gestured at the arched opening of a corridor leading behind the altar.

The thirteen-year-old’s gangly limbs froze. Glancing back over his shoulder, Aaron saw the last of the women coming down from the balcony and funneling out the synagogue’s front door. A hand tugged at his arm.

‘Come,’ his father repeated. ‘There’s nothing to fear, I assure you.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ Aaron lied.

Mordecai splayed his hand between his son’s shoulder blades and urged him up the main aisle of the sanctuary. ‘This is a very special day for you, Aaron.’

‘You are bringing me inside?’

‘That’s right. Grandfather has asked to speak with you.’

Aaron slid his trembling hands into the pockets of his black trousers.

For as long as he could remember, following Saturday’s Shabbat services, the ritual had always been the same. Father would send Aaron’s mother and four sisters home to prepare the fish and meats for the traditional Sabbath meal *shalosh seudot*, and then he’d disappear into a locked room situated behind the main altar. Meanwhile, Aaron would wait in the sanctuary and climb the steps to the balcony, even daringly approach the magnificent walnut cabinet, the Aron Ha-Kodesh, that housed the Torah scrolls and run his fingers along the cabinet’s intricate rosette carvings, stroke the smooth *parokhet* draped over its doors. An hour later, Father would emerge from the room and they’d discuss the Torah readings during their walk home.

But today, Aaron found himself being guided around the altar’s elevated pulpit, or bema, and entering a previously forbidden corridor that was long and painted with shadows. Deep in the darkness, a formidable oak door with a heavy brass dead bolt secured the synagogue’s most secret place.

Never had Father spoken of what lay beyond this door.

Never had Aaron asked why.

Mordecai placed a hand on the knob, hesitated, and turned to his son. ‘Ready?’

Aaron looked up at him. At this moment, Father appeared much younger than before, his graying beard and earlocks darkened by the shadows, the hard creases round his blue-green eyes seemingly smoothed away. And his expression was one that Aaron would never forget: pride and solidarity intermingled with trepidation. They were two men about to embark on a journey.

‘Ready,’ Aaron tremulously replied, the thumping in his chest so fierce it resonated in his ears.

Mordecai rapped twice with his knuckles, then turned the doorknob. He eased the door open and held out his hand. ‘Inside, son.’

The sweet smell of incense rushed into Aaron’s nostrils as he stepped over the threshold. The space that lay beyond the door was more mystifying than he’d ever imagined.

The room was cubical and humble in size. A sunbeam lanced the haze through a single arched window set high in the rear wall. Beneath the window, Aaron’s grandfather knelt in front of a second Aron Ha-Kodesh even more magnificent than the one in the sanctuary. Bluish smoke wisped heavenward from a golden censer set before it.

Grandfather bobbed in prayer, a white prayer shawl called a *tallit katan* draped over his stooped shoulders, its *tzitzit* tassels swaying with his incantations.

Silently, Aaron swept his curious gaze around the room and studied an impressive collection of framed oil paintings that covered the wall to his left. Each depicted a scene from the Torah – a storyboard of images, from Moses and the Israelites to the Tabernacle and the lost temple. The wall to his right was dedicated to tall bookshelves packed tight with volumes, spines embossed in Hebrew. Was this a place meant to store sacred texts and vessels – a *genizah*? Aaron tried to imagine what his father had been doing in here every Saturday. Praying? Studying?

The old man eased off the kneeler, then took a few moments to tenderly fold the prayer shawl and tuck it away in one of the scroll cabinet’s drawers. When he finally turned to them, Aaron straightened and directed his gaze to his grandfather’s amazing aquamarine eyes, which brought tranquility to an otherwise fearsome façade. The family resemblance was unmistakable, to the point where Aaron felt he was looking at his own future visage. Beneath his prayer cap, or *kippah*, Grandfather’s earlocks curled in tight twists around his ears to a flowing gray beard.

‘*Shabbat shalom*,’ Grandfather greeted them.

‘*Shabbat shalom*,’ Aaron replied.

‘Hands out of your pockets, my boy,’ he instructed Aaron.

Blushing, Aaron liberated his hands and let them fall to his sides.

‘Better,’ Grandfather said approvingly, stepping closer. ‘We cover the tops of our heads to show humility to God as He watches over us,’ he said, placing his hand on

Aaron's *kippah*, 'but we praise Him with our hands. So be sure He can see them.' Pointing up, Grandfather winked – a small gesture that put Aaron more at ease. 'Mordecai,' he said, addressing the boy's father without taking his eyes off Aaron, 'I ask if Mr. Aaron Cohen and I might have some time alone.'

'Certainly,' Mordecai replied.

Aaron watched his father leave the room, the door closing quietly behind him. The role-switching made the boy feel special, and when he glanced back at Grandfather, he could tell the old man intended it to do so. The electric silence was pierced by a fire truck screaming down Coney Island Avenue. Aaron's eyes darted toward the window as the siren quickly faded.

'Now, Aaron,' Grandfather began, drawing his attention back from the street noise. 'When I was a young boy – the same age as you are now – my father brought me to see *my* grandfather so that I could be told about my family's legacy. First, do you understand what I mean by "legacy"?'

They remained standing, and it wasn't until then that Aaron realized the room lacked any chairs. Aaron nodded, though it wasn't too clear to him what his grandfather really meant.

'It is through our children that we leave behind or pass forward, if you will, our family history – and more precisely, its genealogy. Something you'll learn much more about in the coming years. And through each of us, God transfers His gift across generations.'

'You mean . . . babies?' Now Aaron feared this was a prelude to a discussion on puberty. After all, he'd only read from the Torah during his bar mitzvah a week earlier. Though Jewish law now considered him a man, he had yet to feel like one.

This made Grandfather chuckle. 'Not exactly. Though we can find God's gift inside our progeny.'

Aaron blushed, fighting the compulsion to put his hands in his pockets again. Grandfather's expression suddenly turned severe.

'You see, Aaron, there is something very unique about our ancestors. Something quite different than most families. In fact, it can be traced back thousands of years to a man who shares your honorable name. You see him there in the white robe?' He pointed to one of the framed scenes on the wall and the boy's curious eyes followed.

The painting depicted events from Exodus; it showed a bearded man in a white robe and ceremonial headdress sacrificing a young lamb on a magnificent golden altar. Aaron was momentarily transfixed by the blood gushing forth from the animal's slit neck.

'Your great ancestor Aaron was a very blessed man. You know him from the Torah, yes?'

Knowing his Saturday discussions with Father had paid off, he said in a proud tone, ‘The first high priest of the Hebrews, the *kohen gadol* . . . from the tribe of Levi.’

Grandfather paced over to admire the painting, hands behind his back. ‘That’s right. And Aaron had a very special brother whom his parents had given away to protect him.’

‘*Moshe*,’ Aaron confidently replied. Moses.

Pride showed in Grandfather’s eyes as he nodded and encouraged the boy to elaborate.

‘In Egypt’ – Aaron’s voice trembled slightly – ‘Pharaoh had commanded the killing of all newborn Israelite males. So Moses’s mother placed him in a basket and floated him down the river Nile. Moses was found by Pharaoh’s daughter when she went to bathe in the river. She adopted him.’

‘And raised him in Pharaoh’s court,’ Grandfather added. ‘Very good. As you know, Moses and Aaron were later reunited. Almost thirty-three hundred years ago, God sent Moses to free his brother, his family, and his people from bondage. The Israelites escaped the Egyptian army’ – he pointed to the painting showing Moses with his sacred staff set low to release the seas onto the soldiers and chariots – ‘and fought for forty years to conquer the tribal lands promised to them by God. Moses was the first true messiah. The founder of a new nation. Legacy meant everything to Moses.’

‘And we’re his family?’

‘Thirty-three centuries later, Levite blood flows in my veins, your father’s veins . . .’

‘And mine?’

‘That’s right.’

Aaron was speechless.

‘Your legacy, Aaron, is a priestly legacy we desperately need to preserve.’ He held up his left hand, clenched it into a fist, and shook it to emphasize the importance of his message. ‘But our bloodline hasn’t remained pure, as God intended. Centuries have corrupted us.’

‘The Diaspora?’

Grandfather nodded. ‘And other things too,’ he said in a low tone, and paused. ‘Some of our ancestors have not been mindful of God’s plan. But one day, very soon, I am certain, we will make the bloodline pure again. And when that happens, a new covenant will be made between God and our people. After much tragedy . . .’ He stammered as he thought mournfully about his over one million brethren who’d suffered – most fatally – alongside him in Auschwitz. ‘Israel is struggling to be a

nation once more – to reclaim its lost lands. The tribes are still scattered. Much turmoil remains . . . an unclear future that only God knows.’

Only days earlier, Aaron’s father had told him that Israel’s air force had bombed Egyptian airfields to preempt a strike. Now Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian troops were amassing around Israel’s borders. Father had not stopped praying since it all began.

‘A nation, I’m afraid, that still does not abide by God’s covenant,’ the old man lamented, casting his eyes to the floor. ‘Only when the bloodline is restored can the covenant be restored. Then Israel will truly rise up like a phoenix.’

‘But how will it be restored?’

Grandfather smiled once more. ‘You’re not ready for that yet, my ambitious grandson. But soon, when the time is right, you’ll learn the secrets entrusted to my father, me, my son’ – reaching out, he gently pressed two fingers over the boy’s pounding heart – ‘and you. In the meantime, there is much you will need to learn,’ he said, sweeping his hand across the brimming bookcases. ‘You will come here with your father every Saturday following service. From now on, it will be the three of us.’

Aaron grinned.

‘Three generations,’ he said, patting the boy’s cheek. A thought suddenly came to him. ‘Ah,’ he said, holding up a finger. ‘Which means there is something I must give to you.’

Aaron watched as Grandfather paced to the scroll cabinet, slid open its smallest drawer, and rummaged through the contents. Finding what he was looking for, he held it tight in his hand, closed the drawer, and made his way back.

As he stared at the old man’s closed fist, Aaron’s face glowed with anticipation.

‘For many, many centuries, our family has used a symbol to represent our ancestors. See here . . .’

Grandfather turned over his hand and opened his fingers to reveal a round object resembling a silver dollar. When Aaron pressed closer to examine its details, he realized it wasn’t a coin at all.

‘Tell me what you see on this talisman.’

It was the strangest symbol. Certainly nothing that looked Judaic. In fact, the occultist images seemed to go against Jewish teachings concerning iconography. ‘A fish . . . wrapped around’ – his brow crinkled – ‘a fork?’

‘Yes, but not a fish, a dolphin. And not exactly a fork, but a trident.’ Seeing the boy’s muddled expression, he sternly said, ‘You are never to speak about anything that you are taught in this room unless it is to someone who possesses this same talisman. And you must promise that you will never show this to anyone else. Not even your best friend in the yeshiva. Do you understand?’

‘I understand, Grandfather.’

‘*Yasher koach.*’ And the boy would certainly need strong will, thought Grandfather. The world was fast changing. Snatching the boy’s left hand, he placed the talisman in Aaron’s palm and wrapped the boy’s fingers around it. ‘Protect this.’ He clasped both hands around Aaron’s fist.

The cold metal disk pressed hard into Aaron’s sweaty palm, sending a shiver up his arm.

‘Because from this moment forward,’ Grandfather warned him, ‘you will dedicate your life to preserving everything this symbol stands for.’

1. ROME, ITALY PRESENT DAY

A flock of pigeons took flight as Father James Martin moved swiftly around Caligula’s obelisk, which rose up from the center of Piazza San Pietro like a colossal dagger against the steel-gray sky. Its mid-September shadow would normally have let him know that it was just past five o’clock. But for the third consecutive day, the sun remained hidden behind a shroud of lifeless clouds. Glancing over at St. Peter’s Basilica, he saw the faithful pilgrims queued for the last tour. *Even a typhoon couldn’t scare them away*, he thought.

He pulled his raincoat tighter to fight off a damp chill. He’d need to move quickly to beat the imminent downpour.

Near the end of Via della Conciliazione, he heard a voice calling to him over the sounds of the traffic.

‘Padre Martin?’

Stopping, Martin turned. A man waved to him, splashing through the shallow puddles in quick strides. Of medium height and build, he was ordinary looking – clean-shaven with dark hair and unreadable dark eyes. ‘*Si?*’ Martin replied.

‘Sorry to bother you on your way home,’ he said, planting himself at arm’s length.

A laminated Vatican ID badge was prominently displayed on the lapel of his raincoat, just below his white priest collar. The unfamiliar face was forgettable.

Italian? Lebanese? Maybe thirty-something, or perhaps a youthful fifty, Martin guessed. 'Have we met?'

The man shook his head. 'Not yet.'

'What can I do for you, Father . . . ?'

'Fabrizio Orlando.' He extended his right hand.

Italian. When Martin reciprocated, he noticed that the priest's skin was rough. Unusual for a cleric. Perhaps the man had spent time as a missionary? *The Lord's call doesn't place everyone behind a desk*, Martin reminded himself.

'I've just been appointed to the secretariat's office.'

Why hadn't he been notified? 'I see. Welcome to Vatican City.'

'*Grazie.* Mind if I walk with you for a minute?'

Suspicion showed in Martin's eyes. 'Not at all.'

The two men proceeded down the sidewalk past the cafés and souvenir shops.

'I was told you'd been Cardinal Antonio Santelli's secretary?'

'That's right.' Martin's gait quickened and the man kept pace beside him.

'Very unfortunate, His Eminence's death. A deep loss for the Holy See.' He tightened his lips in a show of solemnity. 'He was a visionary.' As they approached Piazza Pia's busy thoroughfare, his pitch rose to compete with the bus and scooter traffic. 'Many had said he would be the Holy Father's successor.'

'Yes, well . . .' Attempting to echo the priest's fond words, Martin stalled, knowing that his own remembrances wouldn't be nearly as complimentary. The fact remained that regardless of Santelli's unsullied public image as having been a last great defender of Catholic dogma, the late cardinal had been merciless to his subordinates – a bulldog. Martin chose to bow his head in prayer.

'May God rest his soul,' Orlando said loudly as a whining Vespa sped past.

At the busy intersection, they remained silent to negotiate the crosswalk.

Martin resumed the conversation as he led the way down the cobbled walkway in front of Castel Sant'Angelo's outer rampart. 'So how can I assist you, Father?'

The priest's chin tipped up. 'Yes, about business then.' A momentary stare down at the roiling Tiber helped him collect his thoughts. 'The secretariat has retained my services to assist in ongoing inquiries concerning the death of Dr. Giovanni Bersei.'

Martin stiffened. 'I see.'

They angled onto Ponte Sant'Angelo.

The man went on to convey what his fact-finding mission had yielded thus far. Back in June, Italian anthropologist Giovanni Bersei had been commissioned by Cardinal Santelli to assist in a highly secretive project inside the Vatican. Only days later, Bersei had been found dead in the catacombs beneath Villa Torlonia. An elderly docent was also found dead on the premises and a routine autopsy showed he had been injected with heart-arresting toxins. Roman authorities had investigated the

foul play. Santelli, too, Orlando conspiratorially reminded him, had succumbed to heart failure only a day later, though the Holy See had refused an autopsy.

By the time the Italian had finished, he'd trailed Martin to within a block of his apartment building.

There was no doubt Orlando was well informed. But Martin wasn't looking to rehash the exhaustive questioning he'd endured in the weeks that followed the cardinal's death. 'I trust you have been informed that the carabinieri have completed their investigations?'

The man's lips pulled tight. 'Mine is an internal investigation,' he repeated.

Approaching the narrow alley that was the shortcut to his apartment building, Martin stopped. 'I don't mean to be rude, but I think it would be best for us to speak about this during business hours. After I've obtained permission from the sec-retariat's office.'

Orlando forced a placated smile. 'I understand.'

'A pleasure to meet you, Father Orlando.' Martin nodded.

'Likewise.'

Martin stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned down the alley. As he was about to pass a stocky deliveryman unloading produce boxes from an idling van, he heard the priest calling after him again, quick footsteps tapping along the ancient cobblestones.

'Father.'

Stopping in his tracks, Martin's shoulders slumped. Before he could turn to address Orlando, the anxious priest had circled in front of him.

'If I could just have another moment.'

'What is it?'

Later, Martin would recall no answer. Just the priest's eyes turning cold, slipping back to the sidewalk, then up to the windows overlooking the alleyway, and finally over Martin's shoulder to the deliveryman.

Without warning, two strong hands grabbed at Martin's coat, yanking hard, forcing his body into an uncontrolled spin, directly toward the van's open cargo hold.

What in God's name?!

A sharp blow to the knees forced him down onto the cold metal floor. '*Aiuto!*' he screamed out to anyone who might hear. '*Aiu—*'