

Chapter Three

Twenty-six years later, Rome...

The weeping city was shrouded in a leaden pall of smoke. Above the cries of the wounded and dying, a tolling bell solemnly lamented man's legacy—now crushed and broken between the dust and rubble that had become the domain of vermin. Scuttling from the shadows, the creatures openly mocked the scourge-ridden populace for whom neither cures nor hope were to be found.

The streets were shattered. Fires raged from gaping asphalt crevasses and the bowels of once-proud monuments and buildings. Churning rivers of blood wound through the blighted land, the fallen drifting on its surface like scattered autumn leaves.

Temporary Red Cross camps served as hospitals. Makeshift tents were crowded around flickering bonfires—the flames illuminating the gaunt, haunted faces of the homeless. Volunteers tended to the wounded, the sick, and the dying as best they could. Without sufficient medical supplies or hope of adequate treatment, their efforts were almost futile, their main task to comfort the dying. A tangible essence of fear and desperation tainted the air.

As the dirge of the tolling bell faded, the frightened voice of a reporter bleated from a static-ridden radio transmission.

“Without time for recuperation after the brief but catastrophic third world war, it is as though the world has been pummeled by a mighty fist. Great cities have tumbled like dominoes. Earthquakes, tidal waves, firestorms, and typhoons have devastated entire countries and have left others crippled. Survivors face pandemic famine and disease while desperate refugees pour into the few remaining havens on Earth.”

The reporter became emotional, almost hysterical, as she described the widespread destruction.

“It's like a vision from hell,” she told whatever audience could still receive the transmission. “But one I never thought humanity would witness. Everything we knew, all we have accomplished, has been swept aside as if with a giant broom. All over the world, the signature of humanity is being erased. The Great Wall of China lies toppled like a child's discarded building blocks—the once mighty pyramids are nothing but mounds of dust. The Statue of Liberty gazes not at the sky but at the murky bottom of New York Harbor, nor will we ever again hear the resonant chimes of Big Ben.”

She paused to catch a ragged breath. “And if the destruction of our homes, our countries, our planet, is not enough, so many have lost their very souls to this darkness. Cults based on sex and sadistic practices have ensnared many of the homeless while others have abandoned themselves to public orgies and the selling of flesh for a mouthful of clean water...”

Static shattered and finally silenced the transmission. Almost as if in response, a flurry of bats rose like a malevolent cloud from the Basilica of St. Peters, the hands of its clock permanently stopped at midnight, the bell silent as it gazed over the devastated city. Though Michelangelo's great dome was damaged, the apses, facade statues, and columns crumbling and showering a hail of debris, the Basilica stood like an eternal symbol of hope among the ruins. Holy fire shone through broken windows, and its massive doors hung askew.

The fiery light beamed through the intact stained glass image of the Holy Spirit—the dove, a shining symbol above the miraculously undamaged altar. A faint whisper of organ music resonated through the rubble-strewn interior and toppled monuments to fade to the sound of a child softly singing. Huddled by the altar below the Chair of St. Peter, a little girl gazed at the beatific light as it embraced her. Her dirt-caked face and tangled blonde hair could not conceal her angelic beauty. She resembled a cherub incarnate. Suddenly, she stopped singing and listened intently.

Angelica, a soft female voice, said. There is something for you beneath the rubble. Take it and keep it safe.

The warm, gentle resonance of the voice soothed away her fear. Her eyes darted to the pile of rubble beside her. Something glinted between the rocks, and she quickly dug to reach the gleaming object. Her deep blue eyes glowed in rapture as she pulled out a golden candlestick and tucked it into the pocket of her tattered coat.

An injured priest stumbled from an annex, his bloodied vestments torn. Though weak and emaciated, he bore no sign of the scourge. His dark, sunken eyes darted in search of the source of the melodic voice. Finally, his gaze fell to the altar. Father Claudio walked slowly toward the child and babbled incoherently before he picked her up and cradled her in his arms. “Povero bambina. Padre Claudio li aiuterà,” he said while trying to cover the child with his torn habit. The girl did not resist. Floundering through the debris, clutching the little girl tight against his chest, the glow of holy fire bathed them in benevolent light as they fled the Basilica.

The ravaged streets were almost impassable. More than once, Father Claudio and the child had to hide from marauders who would kill for a scrap of bread. Even worse were the notorious rape gangs prowling the cities. The predators, which often included women, made no distinction between women, girls, and young boys.

Only yesterday, he had witnessed the brutal assault of a bedraggled young woman barely out of her teens. Set upon by three emaciated men while she tried to drink from a filthy, broken drainpipe, her frail body could not withstand the multiple rapes. Her cries wrenched his soul. Muttering a prayer for the girl, Father Claudio watched in shame from the shadows of a demolished row of shops—wanting desperately to help but knowing he was outnumbered and a dead man, should he try to intervene.

Abandoned naked and bleeding in the gutter, the young woman died before his eyes. Father Claudio emerged to administer the last rites but broke down before he could utter the words. He clasped the girl's cold hand and sobbed for forgiveness. Stealthily approaching footsteps forced him away. He wanted to look back but did not dare for fear of what he might have seen, for in these dark days, death was not the final indignity...

Vermin squealed mockingly from alleys and gutters, their eyes feral pinpoints in the darkness. The priest eventually found an emergency Red Cross shelter and left the little girl with a nurse and object. Her deep blue eyes glowed in rapture as she pulled out a golden candlestick and tucked it into the pocket of her tattered coat.

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She sat silently among the group of crying children. Quietly, she waited until a volunteer approached her.

“What’s your name, little girl?” Greg Collins, a British volunteer, softly asked. She didn’t answer. Her eyes were large and unafraid as she gazed at him solemnly. “Nome? Come ti chiami?” he asked in Italian.

He felt spellbound by her direct gaze, and then he implicitly understood that something had led him to this child. She was different from the other children in a profound way. At all costs, she had to be on the next mercy flight. All sound around them ceased as their minds touched. Without speaking, she conveyed a message to him.

“Il mio nome e Angelica Peragine. Sono la sorella di Aislinn. Fra poco, la mia sorella ed io saremmo insieme di nuovo.”

Greg’s Italian was limited, but he understood the words that whispered in his mind. Her name was Angelica, and soon, she would be together again with her sister. Aislinn. He had dreamed about this woman so often, the visions always affirming that his path would lead him to Italy for an important purpose. Now he understood why.

He nodded and gazed deeply into Angelica’s fathomless blue eyes. The cries of the other children faded as the young man and the child shared a moment of peace, understanding, and hope. For a moment, the passage of time was suspended as tranquility descended.

Slowly, the surrounding noise encroached. The spell was finally shattered as a nurse tapped him on the shoulder, requesting his help. Reluctantly, he released the child’s small hand and turned away to help with the other children.

Angelica Peragine sat quietly in a corner. Unlike the other children, she wasn’t afraid. While huddled near the altar, she heard the voice, and suddenly, like a bad dream, all insecurity and fear vanished.

The voice continued talking to her while the spheres serenaded her. She listened, enthralled by the words. The voice was sweet, warm, almost like her mother’s, but she knew it wasn’t. Her mother was gone forever, swallowed by a violent earthquake that had shaken their village. And the voice was with her now, soothing her, whispering calming, reassuring words.

Soon, my child, you will be with your sister. We will lead you to her.

Her father was also gone—as were all the people she loved. The violence and terror that ravaged the land had consumed them. But she was still not alone. She had the voice, a guardian no one could see, but one that lulled her fear and dried her tears. The voice had instructed her to take the candlestick and bring it to Aislinn.

Aislinn—she thought, the name filling her with anticipation. *My sister...*

She fingered the candlestick hidden inside her coat pocket and watched Greg tending the other children. They had spoken to each other through their thoughts and she understood they would meet again.

Now she heard the voice again, and luminous balls of light danced around her. *Angelica, we are with you, chanted a mellifluous chorus. Do not be afraid, child. We are the Antiquitas. We are your friends and will travel with you. Soon, you will be with the chosen ones. Take good care of the talisman. It is the key to the future. Aislinn, your sister, awaits you.*

The voices receded, but the rainbow lights remained, surrounding her with song and music. Mesmerized, she listened, comforted by their presence and a sense of recognition.

Waiting...

Later, as a forbidding mantle of cloud pressed against the city, a Red Cross team escorted the children on the hazardous journey to the airport. A solitary transport plane waited with revving engines amidst the ruined terminals. It was the last flight to leave for Vancouver, Canada, one of the few remaining cities capable of accepting refugees. The team hurriedly boarded the children on the mercy flight, their backs hunched against a bitterly cold wind.

A mighty rumble shook the earth as the plane taxied toward the crumbling runway. The land swayed, toppling the remaining buildings into the maw of a great crevice bisecting the airport. With shrieking engines, the last mercy flight from Rome lifted off, its rising tires barely avoiding the magma that gushed forth from the wounded earth like geysers, consuming everything in sight.

Unafraid, Angelica gazed out of the grimy window at the surging clouds. Lightning scythed the darkness, momentarily illuminating an insectoid shape hovering beyond. Turbulence buffeted the plane, eliciting cries of fear from the other passengers. She clasped her hands tightly and closed her eyes, shutting out the image of the ominous shadow. Suddenly, she dared to look again when radiant color shimmered through her closed eyelids. The sublime glow of a diffused rainbow appeared outside her window. Around her, the sound of crying children faded as she regarded the hovering sphere that floated alongside the plane as if in protection.

“Aislinn, sto venendo,” she whispered. *She is coming...* the voices echoed softly.