

Prologue



I

Naples—November 1749

The scrape was hardly there, but it still woke him up. It wasn't really loud enough to rouse anyone from a deep sleep, but then, he hadn't slept well for years.

It sounded like metal, brushing against stone.

Could be nothing. An anodyne, household noise. One of the servants getting a head start on the day.

Maybe.

On the other hand, it could be something less auspicious. Like a sword. Accidentally scraping along a wall.

Someone's here.

He sat up, listening intently. Everything was deathly quiet for a moment. Then he heard something else.

Footsteps.

Stealing up cold limestone stairs.

At the edge of his consciousness, but definitely there.

And getting closer.

He bolted out of bed and over to the French windows that led to a small balcony across from the fireplace. He pulled the curtain to one side, swung the door open quietly and slipped out into the biting night air. Winter was closing in quickly now, and his bare feet froze on the icy stone floor. He leaned over the balustrade and peered down. The courtyard of his palazzo was enshrouded in a stygian darkness. He concentrated his gaze, looking for a reflection, a glint of movement, but he couldn't see any sign of life below. No horses, no carts, no valets or servants. Across the street and beyond, the outlines of the other houses were barely discernible, backlit by the first glimmer of dawn that hinted from behind Vesuvius. He'd witnessed the sun rising up behind the mountain and its ominous trail of gray smoke several times. It was a majestic, inspiring sight, one that usually brought him some solace when not much else did.

Tonight was different. He could feel a prickling malignancy in the air.

He hurried back inside and slipped on his breeches and a shirt, not bothering with the buttons. There were more pressing needs. He rushed to his dressing table and pulled open its top drawer. His fingers had just managed to reach the dagger's grip when the door to his bedchamber burst open and three men charged in. Their swords were already drawn. In the dim light of the dying embers in the hearth, he could also make out a pistol carried by the middle man.

The light was enough for him to recognize the man. And instantly, he knew what this was about.

“Don’t do anything foolish, Montferrat,” the lead attacker rasped.

The man who went by the name of the Marquis de Montferrat raised his arms calmly and carefully side-stepped away from the dressing table. The intruders fanned out to either side of him, their blades hovering menacingly in his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked cautiously.

Raimondo di Sangro sheathed his sword and laid his pistol on the table. He grabbed a side chair and kicked it over to the marquis. It hit a groove in the flooring and tumbled noisily onto its side. “Sit down,” he barked. “I suspect this is going to take a while.”

His eyes fixed on di Sangro, Montferrat righted the chair and hesitantly sat down. “What do you want?”

Di Sangro reached into the hearth and ignited a taper, which he used to light an oil lantern. He set it on the table and retrieved his gun, then waved his men out dismissively with it. They nodded and left the room, closing the door behind them. Di Sangro pulled over another chair and sat astride it, face-to-face with his prey. “You know very well what I want, Montferrat,” he replied, aiming the double-barrel flintlock pistol at him menacingly as he studied him, before adding acidly, “And you can start with your real name.”

“My real name?”

“Let’s not play games, *Marquese*.” He slurred the last

word mockingly, his face brimming with condescension. “I had your letters checked. They’re forged. In fact, nothing in the vague snippets you’ve let slip about your past, since the moment you got here, seems to have any truth.”

Montferrat knew that his accuser had all the resources necessary to make such inquiries. Raimondo di Sangro had inherited the title of *principe di San Severo*—prince of San Severo—at the tender age of sixteen, after the deaths of his two brothers. He counted the young Spanish king of Naples and Sicily, Charles VII, among his friends and admirers.

How could I have so misread this man? Montferrat thought with burgeoning horror. How could I have so misread this place?

After years of torment and self-doubt, he had finally abandoned his quest in the Orient and returned to Europe less than a year earlier, making his way to Naples by way of Constantinople and Venice. He hadn’t intended to stay in the city. His plan had been to continue onward to Messina, and from there to sail on to Spain and, possibly, back home to Portugal.

He paused at the thought.

Home.

A word meant for others, not for him. An empty, hollow word, bone-picked clean of any resonance by the passage of time.

Naples had given pause to his thoughts of surrender. Under the Spanish viceroys, it had grown to become the

second city of Europe, after Paris. It was also part of a new Europe he was discovering, a different Europe than the one he had left behind. It was a land where the ideas of the Enlightenment were steering people to a new future, ideas embraced and nurtured in Naples by Charles VII, who had championed discourse, learning, and cultural debate. The king had set up a National Library, as well as an Archaeological Museum to house the relics unearthed from the recently discovered buried towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Of further allure was that the king was hostile to the Inquisition, the bane of Montferrat's previous life. Wary of the Jesuits' influence, the king had trod carefully in suppressing them, which he had managed to do without raising the ire of the pope.

And so he had reverted to the name he'd used in Venice many years earlier, the Marquis of Montferrat. He'd found it easy to lose himself in the bustling city and its visitors. Several countries had founded academies in Naples to house the steady stream of travelers who came to study the newly excavated Roman towns. Soon, he was meeting scholars, both locals and visitors from across Europe, like-minded men with inquisitive minds.

Men like Raimondo di Sangro.

Inquisitive mind, indeed.

"All these lies," di Sangro continued, gauging his pistol, eyeing Montferrat with a glint of unbridled greed. "And yet, intriguing and rather odd, since that dear old lady, the Contessa di Czergy, claims she knew you by the

very same name in Venice, Montferrat . . . how many years ago was it now? Thirty? More?”

The name spiked through the false marquis like a blade. *He knows. No, he cannot know. But he suspects.*

“Obviously, the old parsnip’s mind isn’t what it used to be. The ravages of time will get us all in the end, won’t they?” di Sangro pressed on. “But about you, she was so insistent, so clear, so resolute and adamant that she wasn’t mistaken . . . it was hard to dismiss her words as the delusional ramblings of an old crone. And then I discover that you speak Arabic with the tongue of a native. That you know Constantinople like the back of your hand and that you’ve traveled extensively in the Orient, posing—impeccably, or so I’m told—as an Arab sheikh. So many mysteries for one man, *Marquese*. It defies logic—or belief.”

Montferrat frowned inwardly, berating himself for even considering the man a kindred spirit, a potential ally. For testing him, probing him, however cryptically.

Yes, he had totally misjudged the man. But, he thought, perhaps this was fate. Perhaps it was time to unburden himself. Perhaps it was time to let the world in on his secret. Perhaps man could find a way to deal with it in a noble and magnanimous way.

Di Sangro’s eyes were locked on him, studying every twitch in his face. “Come now. I had to drag myself out of bed at this ungodly hour just to hear your story, *Marquese*,” he said haughtily. “And to be frank with you, I

don't particularly care who you really are or where you're really from. All I want to know is your secret."

Montferrat met his inquisitor's gaze straight on. "You don't want to know, *Principe*. Trust me. It is not a gift, not for any man. It is a curse, pure and simple. A curse from which there is no respite."

Di Sangro wasn't moved. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Montferrat leaned in. "You have a family," he said, his voice now hollow and distant. "A wife. Children. The king is your friend. What more could a man ask for?"

The answer came back with unsettling ease. "More. Of the same."

Montferrat shook his head. "You should leave things be."

Di Sangro edged closer to his prisoner. His eyes were blazing with an almost messianic fervor. "Listen to me, *Marquese*. This city, this paltry boy-king . . . that is nothing. If what I suspect you know is true, we can be emperors. Don't you understand? People will sell their very souls for this."

The false marquis didn't doubt it for a second. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Di Sangro's breathing got heavier with frustration as he tried to size up the man's resolve. His eyes flickered downwards as he seemed to catch sight of something on Montferrat's chest that piqued his curiosity. He leaned menacingly closer and reached across the table, pulling out a chain-hung medallion from underneath the false

marquis's opened shirt. Montferrat's hand flew up and grabbed di Sangro's wrist, stilling it, but the prince quickly raised his gun and cocked back its flintlock. Montferrat slowly released his grip. The prince held the medallion in his fingers a moment longer, then suddenly yanked it off Montferrat's neck, splitting its chain. He held the medallion closer, examining it.

It was a simple, round piece, cast out of bronze, like a large coin, a little over two digits in diameter. Its sole feature was a snake, which lay coiled around the medallion's face, ringlike, its head at the top of the circle formed by its own body.

The snake was devouring its own tail.

The prince looked a question at Montferrat. The false marquis's hardened eyes gave nothing away. "I'm tired of waiting, *Marquese*," di Sangro hissed menacingly. "I'm tired of trying to make sense of this," he rasped as his fingers tightened against the medallion and he shook it angrily at Montferrat, "tired of your cryptic remarks, of trying to read through all your esoteric references. I'm tired of hearing reports about your passing questions to certain scholars and travelers and piecing together what I now believe is true about you. I want to know. I *demand* to know. So it's really your choice. You can tell me, here, now. Or you can take it with you to your grave." He pushed his gun even closer. Its over-and-under twin barrels were now hovering inches from his prisoner's face. He let the threat hang there for a moment. "But if that were to be your decision," he added, "to die here to-

night and take your knowledge with you, I would ask you to ponder one thing: What gives you the right to deprive us, to hold the world in contempt and in ignorance? What did you do to deserve the right to make that choice for the rest of us?"

It was a question the man had asked himself many times, a question that had haunted his very existence.

In a distant past, another man, an old man whom he had watched die, a friend whose death he had even—in his own eyes—helped bring about, had made that choice for him. With his dying breath, his friend had stunned him by telling him that despite Montferrat's deplorable and heinous actions, he could see the reticence and the doubt in his eyes. Somehow, the old man felt sure that the valor, the nobility, and the honesty of his young ward were still there, buried deep within, smothered by a misguided sense of duty. In his darkest hour, that friend had managed to find promise and purpose in his young ward's life, something the false marquis had himself long given up on. And with that came an admission, a revelation, and a mission that would consume the rest of Montferrat's life.

The choice had been made for him. The right to decide had been bequeathed to him by someone far more deserving than he had ever imagined himself to be.

But he had surprised himself.

He had done his best, tried his hardest, to discover what the missing pages of the codex had contained and wrest the ancient book's lost secrets.

He'd managed to evade his accusers in Portugal. He'd

searched in Spain, and in Rome. He'd traveled to Constantinople and beyond, to the Orient. But he hadn't found anything to advance his quest.

He had failed.

He'd thought a return to the land of his birth would help him decide on what his next step would be. Di Sangro's interruption had put pause to all that. And in the fog that clouded his mind, one thing glowed with certainty: that holding the man who was sitting before him in contempt and keeping him in ignorance was a choice he was happy to make.

The rest of the world, well . . . that was another matter.

"Well?" di Sangro snapped, his hand wavering slightly under the weight of the pistol.

The man who called himself Montferrat leapt out of his chair and hurled himself at his adversary, reaching out and pushing his pistol away just as di Sangro pulled the trigger. The charge exploded in a deafening roar as both men grappled over the gun, its lead ball bursting out of the upper muzzle and whistling past Montferrat's ear before biting into the paneling on the wall behind him. The two men slammed into the table by the fireplace, still fighting for the gun, as the door to the bedchamber swung open. Di Sangro's henchmen rushed in, swords raised. Montferrat caught the momentary distraction in his adversary's eyes and exploited it, hammering the *principe* with a fierce back-elbow that caught him in the throat. The prince recoiled backwards under the blow,

loosening his grip on the pistol just enough for Montferrat to wrest it from him. Montferrat pushed the prince away and raised the pistol, rotating its barrel and cocking its firing arm as he moved away from the first of the henchmen, who was already charging at him, and fired. The round struck his attacker in the chest, causing him to twist sideways and drop to the ground at Montferrat's feet.

Montferrat hurled the empty pistol at the second attacker and swiftly picked up the fallen man's sword. The prince had recovered somewhat, and despite being unsteady on his feet, he drew his own sword. "Don't kill him," he hissed, inching forward to join his henchman. "I need him alive . . . for now."

Montferrat gripped the sword with both hands, holding it up defensively, flicking it left and right to keep his attackers at bay. The two men facing him were impatient, and in his experience, poise was as effective a weapon as a sword. He would wait for them to make a mistake. The henchman was eager to prove his worth and lunged forward recklessly. Montferrat blocked the strike with his sword and kicked the man with all his might, his bare foot catching the man in his thigh. The man howled with pain, and from the corner of his eye, Montferrat noted that the prince had held back mindfully. He decided to stay on his attacker and swung his sword, catching the faltering man's blade with the full brunt of his own and knocking it out from his hand. The prince screamed in anger and rushed forward, interrupting Montferrat,

whose sword was now needed elsewhere. Montferrat managed to kick his first attacker back before quickly spinning to face di Sangro. The henchman reeled backwards, crashing into the table and slipping off it into the large fireplace. Sparks and embers flew out from the hearth as he yelped from the pain in his seared hand, with which he had tried to catch his fall. Montferrat saw the man's sleeve catch fire just as the lantern, which had fallen off the table, ignited the carpet in a swath of fire.

The false marquis struggled to parry the resurgent di Sangro's thrusts as the flames from the carpet grew furiously and licked at the thick velvet curtain before taking hold of it. The heat and the smoke in the bedchamber were infernal as the prince fought on relentlessly and surprised Montferrat with a ferocious strike that knocked the sword from his hands. Montferrat stepped backwards, trying to avoid the edge of di Sangro's blade, which now loomed too close to his throat. Through the rising smoke in the chamber, he noticed that the thug with the burnt hand had managed to extinguish the flames on his coat and was now rising to rejoin the fray. The man moved sideways, positioning himself by the bedchamber door to block any attempt at escape by Montferrat.

Montferrat was outnumbered and outgunned, and he knew it.

Darting nervous glances left and right, he saw a possible way out and decided to chance it. He raised his

hands and sidestepped towards the burning curtain, his eyes locked on di Sangro.

“We need to put this fire out before it spreads to the other floors,” Montferrat shouted, his feet circling cautiously towards the curtain.

“To hell with the other floors,” di Sangro fired back, “just as long as what you know doesn’t go up in flames.”

Montferrat had managed to edge his way over to the burning curtain. The henchman’s discarded, half-burnt coat was lying there, smoldering. Montferrat made his move. He grabbed the coat and used it to shield his hands as he reached into the flames and yanked the curtain off its rail before flinging it at di Sangro and his lackey. The flaming cloak landed heavily on the prince’s man, who yelled out in horror as he furiously tried to bat it off him. It enshrouded him in its flaming embrace until he managed to flick it to the floor, where it created a barrier of fire between them and their quarry. Montferrat didn’t wait. He yanked open the door to the balcony and rushed out into the night.

After the intense heat in the bedchamber, the chilly air coming in from the bay hit him like a slap. Casting a quick look back inside, he saw di Sangro and his half-burnt henchman trampling feverishly on the flames and edging around them to follow him. Di Sangro raised his gaze and locked eyes with Montferrat. Montferrat nodded, and with his heart in his mouth, he climbed onto the railing and flung himself off it.

He landed with a thud on the balcony of an adjacent chamber on the floor below. The landing sent a jolt of pain searing through his jaw and teeth and rattling in his head. He shook it off and sprang to his feet, climbing over the wrought-iron railing before hurling himself onto the roof that jutted out two floors below just as di Sangro made it onto the balcony.

“Get him,” di Sangro yelled into the darkness as he stood there, backlit by the flames like a demon from hell. Montferrat glanced over at the palazzo’s entrance and spotted two men rushing out into the darkness, silhouetted against the light coming from a lantern one of them carried. He clambered across one roof and jumped onto the roof of an abutting structure, sending tiles clattering to the ground below. He looked at the rooftops and chimneys ahead, mapping out his escape route. In the darkness of the densely built city, he knew he could lose his pursuers and disappear.

What concerned him more was what he knew had to come.

Once he had retrieved the precious trove he kept tucked away in a safe spot, far from his palazzo—a precaution he always took—he would have to move on.

He would have to find himself a new name and a new home.

Reinvent himself. Yet again.

He had done it before.

He would do it again.

He heard di Sangro bellowing “Montferrat” into the

night like a man possessed. He knew he hadn't seen the last of him. A man like di Sangro wouldn't give up that easily. He'd been infected by a feverish greed that, once it took hold of a man, would never let go.

The thought chilled Montferrat to the bone as he slipped into the night.

II

Baghdad—April 2003

“Sir, we’ve just gone over the ten-minute mark.”

Captain Eric Rucker of the First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry Regiment, checked his watch and nodded. He looked at the faces around him, grimy and tense, dripping with sweat. It wasn't even ten in the morning and the sun was already beating down on them with murderous heat. The heavy protective gear didn't help either, not when it was 110 degrees in the shade. But they couldn't do without it.

The deadline had passed.

It was time to go in.

With eerie synchronicity, a call to prayer from a nearby minaret cut through the dusty, stifling air. Rucker heard a creak behind him and looked up to see an old woman with half-graying, half-hennaed hair lean out from a window in a house across the street from the target. She

studied him with grim, lifeless eyes before swinging the window's shutters closed.

He gave her a few moments to find shelter deeper in the house; then, with a curt nod to the XO, he initiated the assault.

A Mark 19 grenade launched from the lead Humvee whistled across the wide street and obliterated the main gate to the compound. Squad leaders rushed in with twenty or so soldiers close behind and immediately came under small-arms fire. Bullets snapped around them as they fanned out through the courtyard and ducked for cover behind anything they could find. Two men fell before the rest had managed to secure safe positions on either side of the house's entrance. They soon unleashed a torrent of gunfire onto the house as cover while the wounded were swiftly pulled back out to the relative safety of the street by men with big biceps and bigger hearts.

The house's front door was barricaded, its windows blocked out. Over the next twenty-two minutes, thousands of rounds were exchanged, but little progress was made. Another soldier was hit as the car he was crouching behind was peppered with bullets from the house.

Rucker gave the order to withdraw. The house was surrounded. The men inside weren't going anywhere.

Time was on his side.



LIKE SO MANY OF THE OTHERS that followed, it had all started with a walk-in.

On that sweltering spring evening, a middle-aged man in a tattered suit and a swath of soiled cloth around his head had walked up to the soldiers manning the gate at FOB Camp Headhunter. Wary of being spotted cozying up to the enemy, he spoke low and fast. The soldiers kept him at bay while they called over a local they used as an interpreter. The interpreter listened to the man's claims and told them the man should be allowed in as soon as he could be checked for explosives. The interpreter then rushed in to alert the camp's commander.

The man had information regarding the whereabouts of a "person of interest."

The hunt was on.

Tracking down Saddam's gang of hard-core Ba'athists was priority one for the military in Iraq. The "thunder run" had been swift, the city had been taken sooner and with far more ease than expected, but most of the bad guys had skipped town. Few on the Pentagon's deck of fifty-five most-wanted Iraqis—not the Ace of Spades himself, nor his two sons—had been captured or killed as yet.

Safely ensconced in a briefing room in the base, the man in the headdress was agitated when he spoke. More than agitated. He was downright terrified. The interpreter pointed this out to the base commander, who didn't read too much into it. For him, it was expected. These people had lived under a monstrous and ruthless

dictatorship for decades. Squealing on one of their tormentors wasn't exactly a casual undertaking.

The interpreter wasn't so sure.

The base commander was disappointed to find out that the regime member being shopped by the man in the headdress wasn't on the Pentagon's most-wanted list. In fact, no one had ever heard of him. They didn't seem to know anything about him at all.

The man in the headdress didn't even know his name. He referred to him only as the *hakeem*.

The doctor.

And even nestled in the safety of the forward operating base, he could only utter the word in a cowed, hushed tone.

He didn't have a name to give them. He didn't have much in terms of hard detail, except that before the invasion, men in darkened, official-looking cars were often seen driving into his compound in the middle of the night. The fearless leader himself had been to see him on a few occasions.

He couldn't even really describe him, except for one chilling detail that intrigued all those in the room: The hakeem wasn't Iraqi. He wasn't even an Arab.

He was a Westerner.

And there were certainly no Westerners on the deck of cards.

For that matter, only one person on the list was not part of the military or the government. Curiously, she was also the only queen in the deck—biologically speak-

ing, anyway. The lowest-ranked card in the deck was a woman, a scientist named Huda Ammash, affectionately nicknamed Mrs. Anthrax, the daughter of a former minister of defense and rumored to be the head of Iraq's biological weapons program.

The elements were all there. Doctor. Close to Saddam. Westerner. Terrified local. It was enough to get the ball rolling.

Intel was requested and delivered that very night.

Plans were drawn up.

By first light, Rucker and his men had secured the outer cordon with ground forces and armored vehicles. The target location, as pinpointed by the man in the headdress, was a three-story concrete house in the middle of the Saddamiya district of Baghdad. The area hadn't always gone by that name. It had once been a hard neighborhood. Saddam had grown up on its mean streets, attended school there, and that was where he'd forged his unique take on life. After taking over the country, he'd brought in the bulldozers and had the whole area flattened before redeveloping it as a closed community of imposing modernist concrete and brick houses set behind arcaded walkways and virtually walled off from the rest of the city. It took on his name and became home to those he deemed worthy. The battalion had been in charge of the area since the troops had taken Baghdad and had treated it with caution, given the obvious aversion to the invading forces from the loyalists who still lived there.

The weapons squads took up their positions; the snipers were in place. The assault was ready for initiation.

Rucker had, as per the newly adopted standard procedure in these cases, used the “cordon-and-knock” approach. Once the perimeter was secured, troops had advanced to the house and made their presence known. An interpreter, using a bullhorn, informed those inside that they had ten minutes to come out of the house with their hands up.

Ten minutes later, all hell had erupted.



AS MEDEVACS TENDED TO the wounded, Rucker gave the order to “prep the objective,” to minimize further casualties during the inevitable reentry attempt. Two OH-58D Kiowa choppers flew in and rained down 2.75-inch rockets and machine-gun fire onto the house, while the ground troops unleashed more Mark 19s and a couple of more potent, shoulder-mounted AT-4 antitank missiles.

Eventually, the house fell silent.

Rucker sent his men back in, only this time, two Humvees charged in ahead of them, their .50-caliber machine guns smoking. He soon realized the objective was more than well prepped. His men made their way in with little difficulty, finding several dead bodies and encountering only three solitary and shell-shocked Republican Guards, who were swiftly taken out.

Relief washed over him when he heard the shouts of

“Clear” over the radio. His advance troops had confirmed overall control of the site.

Rucker made his way into the hakeem’s house as the dead bodies were being lined up for identification. He looked at their dirty, bloodstained faces and frowned. They were all clearly local men, Iraqis, foot soldiers long abandoned by their commanding officers. He called for the man with the headdress to be brought in. The man was spirited in under heavy guard and allowed to check the dead. With each one, he shook his head, his fear more visible with each negative identification.

The hakeem was nowhere to be found.

Rucker scowled. The operation had required considerable resources, three of his men were wounded, one of them seriously, and it looked as if it was all for nothing. He was about to order another sweep when a voice he recognized as belonging to Sergeant Jess Eddison crackled over the radio.

“Sir.” Eddison’s voice had an unsettling quiver in it that Rucker hadn’t heard before. “I think you need to see this.”

Rucker and his XO followed a squad leader to the inner vestibule of the house, from where the grand, marble-clad stairs ascended to the bedroom areas above. A door off to its side led to the basement. Using torches to light up the windowless passage, the three men made their way carefully down the steps and met up with Eddison and a couple of PFCs from the Second Platoon. Eddison

directed his flashlight's beam into the darkness and led them down the hall.

What they found wasn't exactly a standard rec room.

Unless your name was Mengele.

The basement covered the whole footprint of the house as well as its outer courtyard. The first few rooms they found weren't particularly distressing. The first was an office. Its contents seemed to have hastily been cleared out. Shredded papers littered the floor, and a small stack of burnt books lay in a mound of black ash and bindings in a corner. Next door was a large bathroom, followed by another room with sofas and a large TV set.

The room they entered after that was much larger. It was a full-fledged operating room. The fittings and the surgical equipment were state-of-the-art. Its relative cleanliness belied the squalid state of the rest of the house. Presumably, the guards manning the house hadn't ventured in there. Maybe by choice. Or maybe by fear.

Its floor was wet with a bluish liquid. Rucker and his team followed Eddison, their boots squeaking against the damp stone tiles. The passage led to a lab where, lined up on a white Formica drawer unit along the room's long wall, sat a row of clear vats filled with a green-blue solution. A few of them were shattered in what seemed like a random, hasty cover-up. The others were intact.

Rucker and his squad leader moved in for a closer look. Tubes fed into the liquid, and suspended in the undamaged vats were human organs: brains, eyes, hearts,

and some smaller body parts that Rucker didn't recognize. A worktable nearby was littered with petri dishes. They had meticulously marked labels that were indecipherable to their untrained eyes. Next to them sat a pair of powerful microscopes. Cables that would have connected to computers led nowhere. All the computers were gone.

Off to one corner, Rucker found another room, long and narrow. Stepping inside, he found several large, stainless-steel fridges lined up side by side. He thought about whether to check them himself, or to wait for a hazmat team. He decided there wasn't a risk, given the lack of locks or markings, and opened the first of the fridges. It was filled with neatly stacked vats containing a thick red liquid. Even before he saw the labels marked with dates and names, Rucker knew the vats contained blood.

Human blood.

Not the small, medical pouches he was used to.

This was blood by the barrel load.

Eddison led them through to the part of the basement that he had initially signaled them about. A narrow corridor led to another area that must have been excavated under the courtyard, though Rucker couldn't be sure, the dark maze confusing any sense of direction he may have enjoyed aboveground. It was, for all intents and purposes, a prison. Cell after cell lined either side of the passage. The interiors of the cells were decently furnished with beds, toilets, and sinks. Rucker had seen far

worse. It felt more like a windowless hospital ward, if anything.

If it weren't for the bodies.

There were two in each room.

Shot in the head in a final, desperate act of insanity.

There were men and women. Young and old. Children, at least a dozen of them, boys and girls. All wearing identical white jumpsuits.

The last cell would mark Rucker to the end of his days.

On its bare, white floor lay the supine bodies of two young boys. Their heads had recently been shaved clear. They stared up at him with unblinking eyes, small, round punctures cratering their foreheads, acrylic-like pools of blood, thick and shiny, framing their hairless skulls. And on the wall of the cell, a crude drawing, carved into the wall as if with a fork or some other blunt instrument.

The etching of a desperate soul, a silent scream to an uncaring world from a horror-stricken child.

A circular image of a snake, curled on itself, and feeding on its own tail.