

It Begins

Chapter 1

Sunday, June 12, 2022

The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the road, but it still feels warm on my cheeks. My afternoon nap seems to have cured any remaining jetlag. I scan the familiar Piazzale Aurelio which leads directly to the Vatican. Though the imposing stone walls are still a couple of blocks away, I can see them from where I stand, and for a moment I stare at them as if I've never seen them before. For years, they represented home and security to me. They never seemed threatening before, never made me nervous. They were always welcoming.

They haven't changed. I have.

When the Uber pulls up in front of me, I get in. The driver doesn't seem to feel much like talking, and frankly neither do I. My heart races. I am moments away from seeing Lujo again—after so many years. Yet despite my best efforts, uncertainty about the future puts a damper on my enthusiasm. The fifteen-minute trip across town takes forever. I have so many questions. I hope Lujo will be able to enlighten me at least a bit. He's always had the inside scoop about what goes on behind those big old Vatican walls—more than perhaps anyone else in Rome.

The sun has just dipped behind the buildings when we stop in front of the restaurant. The shiver that goes through me could be from the unexpected chill or from stepping back forty years into my past. If anything has changed about the restaurant, I can't tell. The unevenly plastered walls are still lined with baskets of brilliant magenta petunias that hang from rustic wooden

brackets as they always used to. It even smells the same: roasting savory meats combined with a potpourri of spices. The Antico Arco might as well be caught in a time warp.

A car pulls up behind me and a familiar voice cries, “*Amado!*”

My heart swells, and the warm glow that comes over me blots out the chill from a moment ago. Nobody has called me *beloved* on a public street since I left Rome ... and Lujo. By the time I spin around, he’s already rushing toward me, arms open wide. He still cuts quite a figure: he is tall—thinner than I remember—and agile for his age, with a shock of curly white hair framing his deeply care-worn face and broad smile. Whatever damage time and the trials of public life have wrought on him, his eyes are unchanged from the first day we met—as sparkling blue and piercing as ever. Age may take its toll, but what matters persists. Those eyes can strip away my flesh and bones and peer straight into my soul.

Some people look at you, but Lujo *sees* you.

Before I can draw a breath, his arms are around me and he kisses both cheeks. It’s daring to hold him right there on the sidewalk—partly familiar, yet partly strange. From his embrace, I can tell his strength hasn’t diminished, yet up close he looks even gaunter. Maybe it’s because I’m not used to seeing him out of his clerical attire. His street clothes hang off him as though everything is two sizes too big. The prince has exchanged clothes with the pauper.

“Shall we go in?” He ushers me along with an arm around my waist.

I forgot about that habit of his, but my body responds to it as it always has. The body remembers. “Is Alberto still here?”

Lujo looks at me as though I'm deluded. "Think, *Amado*," he says. "He'd be what? At least a hundred and ten." He laughs. "No. Poor Alberto died many years ago. His son, Alessandro has it now."

As we step inside, a man in an open-collared white shirt and black dinner jacket greets us. If Lujo didn't fill me in, I would swear it's Alberto frozen in time. Alessandro has the same stocky build, chubby cheeks, and receding hairline as his father.

"*Buona sera, Eminenza*," he says to Lujo, who returns the greeting.

"Allow me to introduce my dear friend, Bishop Sean Foley. We've shared many of your father's fine meals here."

Alessandro smiles at me. "This way, gentlemen," he says in perfect English and leads us to a private dining room in the rear of the restaurant.

Entering that cozy space is like coming home: the heavily stuccoed walls, chunky, serviceable wooden furniture, and prints of famous Italian paintings in impossibly ornate frames darkened by decades of smoke. It's as though the ghosts of two much younger men sit at that beat-up table waiting for us to rejoin them. I didn't realize how much of my old self I left behind here.

We settle in and Alessandro hands us menus. Neither of us bothers to look at them. Lujo always knows what he wants, and I let him order for us both. I will enjoy whatever he chooses—his taste is impeccable—so it doesn't matter to me. We stare at each other like two silly kids, marveling at how unreal this feels.

Alessandro returns and places Old Fashioned glasses in front of us filled with red liquid. *Campari. Oh no.* Turning down a drink isn't a big deal for me, but I don't want to embarrass Lujo.

Without my having to say a word, Lujo's eyes soften with understanding. "I apologize, Alessandro," he says. "Could you please bring my friend a cranberry and soda?"

Alessandro picks up the glass and leaves the room.

With that, our years of separation melt away and we begin to talk ... or I should say *he* begins to talk. His life has been rich and full, with enough stories about Vatican officials—including four popes—to keep me roaring with laughter. As he drinks the last of his Campari, I ask him to tell me what has been going on in *our office*—meaning the Dicastery for Bishops where we served together in a past life.

Lujo's face falls. "It is not good, I am afraid. Everything has changed. You know how difficult things were when John Paul was pope. Whenever I placed a roster of candidates for bishop before him, it was a foregone conclusion that he would choose the most conservative. For twenty-five years, he made my job nearly impossible ... to say nothing of how difficult that made the lives of people like you and me."

Alessandro emerges from the kitchen with plates piled high with antipasti. Thank goodness I decided to suspend my diet while in Rome. The only two things I've looked forward to on this trip are spending time with Lujo and diving into the food.

"I thought things would have improved under Francis," I say, "but apparently not."

“It has gone both ways. Francis is more open to discussing the place of women and homosexuals in the Church, but he also wants greater diversity. He must be aware of how the Nigerian hierarchy thinks. Yet, he chose Nwadike of all people to head the Dicastery for Bishops. I was not the only one dismissed when that man took over, you know. As you would say, he cleaned house.” Lujo spears a chunk of Genoa salami. “What is on your mind? You look troubled.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? You said yourself Nwadike has us in his crosshairs. It’s the only thing I’ve been able to think about since I got his summons to Rome. When I think about the power that man has and what he could do to me—to us—I get very scared.”

“*Caro mio*, are you afraid he will have you removed from your position as bishop of San Luis Obispo?” He gives a typically Italian palms-up shrug. “You must face the fact that you are seventy-five years old. You will be submitting your retirement paperwork this year anyway. I would have thought you would welcome retirement, my friend.”

Being called to Rome has put my ministry in the Church into a kind of relief I didn’t expect. I never wanted this job, but having been in the position for five years, my opinion has changed. “You were right about the youth groups,” I say. Lujo is right about most things. The youth group I formed as a parish priest and my ministry to at-risk young people were just the beginning of what has turned out to be a true vocation.

“It has been hard for you,” Lujo says. “I know how much resistance you faced along the way but look at what you have done.”

Indeed. Life Force groups now exist in over half the parishes in my diocese. “My groups are still struggling, but at least it’s clear to everybody that LGBTQ young people of every age have a place in the Church—at least in my diocese.”

Lujo gives me a soft round of applause. “Then you have done what you set out to do.”

“Sure,” I say. “But who will continue my work if they force me to retire?” I can’t think of anyone with the experience and credentials to take over—or the will. “The kids depend on these groups. For some of them, it’s a lifeline. Their only one. I was hoping the Holy Father would give me a reprieve. You served ten years past mandatory retirement, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it is true that you have done something wonderful there. But you must not think you did it all by yourself. If God had not wanted it to be, you would never have been able to get it started. If you must leave those groups, trust that God will not abandon them.”

Alessandro removes the plates from the antipasto course and replaces them with bowls of seafood linguini. I pick listlessly at my entrée.

“There is something else,” Lujo says. “I can see it in your face.”

I heave a sigh and set down my fork. “I’m afraid I’m being selfish, but how can I help it? Nwadike is threatening everything I stand for and everything I’ve lived for. You remember Cardinal McCarrick from Washington, DC, don’t you? McCarrick was accused and convicted of having sex with a sixteen-year-old boy. He was not only forced to resign as cardinal and archbishop of Washington but he was also laicized. He lost everything. Nwadike could do the same to me.”

There's a mischievous glint in Lujo's eye. "That is possible, I suppose," he says. "Have you been having sex with sixteen-year-old boys?"

"Don't be an ass. Of course not. But you know as well as I do that there's enough in my past to feed his prejudices and make my life pretty uncomfortable. In his position, he doesn't need a good reason to come down on me. He just needs somewhere to do it."

"Hmm." He picks at his pasta. "Maybe so, but he does not have the last word. The pope himself would have to be convinced before such a penalty could be imposed on you. Besides, you are jumping to conclusions, are you not? You only have my word for what the man is like. You may find him an entirely different person. I doubt it, but it is nonetheless possible."

I huff, unconvinced. "Don't you find it more than a little coincidental that just after you get dismissed from your position he calls me to Rome? Isn't it possible these things are related?" A terrible thought seizes me. "Do you think he knows about us, and his rancor toward you is spilling over onto me?"

Lujo frowns into his disappearing pasta. "He never mentioned you to me. Either he has not noticed our relationship, or he is playing coy in the hopes we might hang ourselves. In any case, he has not threatened me with further punishments."

"Of course not. You are far too powerful and have far too many connections for him to attack you directly." Something else occurs to me. "He may even be going after me to get to you. What do you think?" I'm annoyed that the thought of this spiteful man is ruining the best meal I've had in years.

“What I think”—Lujo scrapes up the last of his pasta with his fork—“is that Alessandro is every bit as fine a cook as his father and that you worry too much. What would you like for dessert?”

His blasé attitude doesn’t make me feel any more secure about the situation. Tomorrow, I’ll face Simon Amobi Cardinal Nwadike, and I still don’t have a good idea of who the man is or what he’s after. I hoped Lujo would give me some deeper insights, but for whatever reason, he hasn’t ... or can’t.

Nwadike doesn’t care. For him, this is all some political ploy and I’m just collateral damage. But it’s my life and ministry on the line. I’m on my own—not even Lujo can advocate for me—and already Nwadike has the upper hand. I’ll be going in blind, and I hate it.