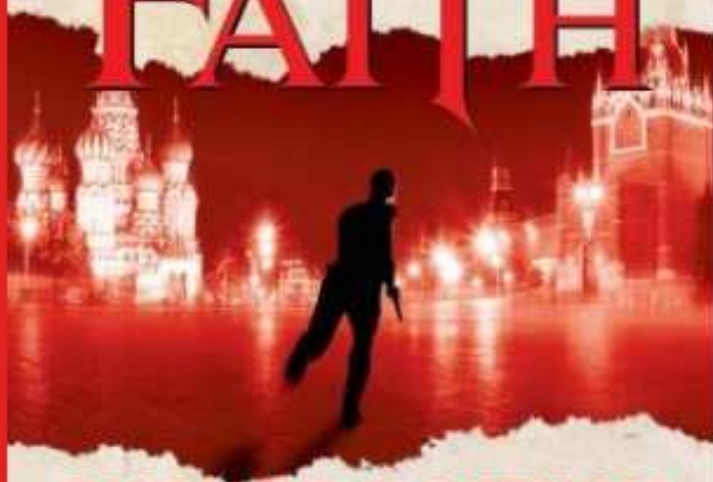


A master thief, A priceless treasure.
The world's most heavily
guarded fortress—about to be breached...

THE THIEVES OF FAITH



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Chapter One

Michael St. Pierre ran at a full tilt up rue de Mont-Blanc in Geneva, Switzerland, dodging cars and buses, streetlamps, and the homeless.

It was two in the morning, Thursday. The late winter snow unexpectedly blew in from the mountains and blanketed the already slick streets of Geneva in a fresh white covering. The storybook buildings, their colors muted by the fresh precipitation, raced by him in a blur as he ran harder than he had ever run before. It had only been forty-five seconds since he left the comfort of modern heat and the feeling had already drained from his ears. His deep blue eyes teared from the wind, each flake of snow like a razor digging into his face as his shock of brown hair whipped about in the chill nighttime air.

The heavy black bag on his back conspired to throw his balance off as he turned down the darkened street and cut through the vacant alleyways, working his way toward the historic district. He became lost in the shadows, his dark, tight coveralls blending with the night as his staccato bursts of breath echoed off the surrounding buildings.

He finally emerged at the back of 24, rue de Fleur. The nondescript five-story town house appeared vacant for the night. But Michael knew better than most that things of significance and value were often hidden behind the unexpected and mundane.

As the snow died off, Michael dug his fingers into the spaces between the granite blocks, testing his grip, thankful for his textured gloves that provided

extra hold. He looked up toward the roof, the snow flurries making it seem as if the climb led into a ghostly white netherworld.

Michael focused his rambling mind, shutting out all distractions. He had less than a minute before the fireworks started; he had less than a minute to fulfill her dying wish.

Michael cinched the pack tight to his back and began his climb.

"Nascentes morimur-from the moment we are born, we die," the priest said as his dark hair was wind-whipped about his face. He was tall, his shoulders wide. His rough hands gripped a rosary, his thumb rubbing the first nub above the cross. Father Simon Bellatori looked more like a grizzled army colonel than a man of the cloth, his deep Italian voice sounding more appropriate delivering orders than benedictions. "Some think of the body as a prison binding us to our mortal existence while our souls are eternal, simply waiting to be released from this earthly flesh. Some think of life as finite but those with faith, those who believe, are filled with hope and the promise of Heaven. For that is where eternal life truly exists, that is where our sister Genevieve will forever reside."

The small group stood in an ancient graveyard on the outskirts of Rome. The gray Italian winter chilled Michael as he looked out toward the city, toward the Vatican in the distance. He bowed his head as he stood graveside listening to his friend's prayers. While the few mourners in attendance clutched missalettes and mass cards, Michael's hand was wrapped in a death grip around a manila envelope. It was emblazoned with a blue cruciform and had arrived exactly one week ago.

She had handed it to him seven days earlier as he opened his front door. She was seated on the front step of his house belly-rubbing Michael's large dogs, Hawk and Raven, who had greeted her in their usual barking frenzy.

"Well, good morning, sleepyhead," Genevieve said, looking up at him with a warm smile. She was dressed in a long white coat, her dark hair swept up in a bun. A single strand of pearls wrapped her wrist while an antique crucifix graced her neck. She was polished and refined, which made Michael grin

even wider as he glanced at her on the snowy ground snuggling up to his two Bernese mountain dogs.

Michael stepped outside into the cool winter morning. "If I knew you were coming . . ."

"What, you would have shaved, cleaned the house?" Genevieve said in her soft Italian accent.

"Something like that." Michael sat down beside her. "Can I make you breakfast?"

She looked at him. Her eyes were warm but they couldn't hide sadness, an emotion Michael had never seen in his friend.

They had met on the occasion of Michael's wife's death. Genevieve had been sent by Father Simon Bellatori, the Vatican's archive liaison, to express the condolences of the Vatican and the Pope himself for the death of Mary St. Pierre.

The fact that Genevieve owned an orphanage was more than ironic; it was no coincidence that Simon had sent her. Michael was orphaned at birth and though he was adopted by loving parents who had since passed on, he felt a kindred spirit to those who had been abandoned . . . and those who opened their hearts and cared for the lost.

Genevieve and Michael's relationship had grown over the past six months. Michael found her to be like an older sister; she understood his anguish, his pain. Her words of comfort were always brief and subtle, knowing that each individual experienced loss differently, grieving in his or her own way. She never passed judgment on Michael for his past, saying that sometimes we are blessed and burdened with unconventional talents and it is to what end we use those talents that defines us. Michael was amazed at her perspective; her outlook on life was always positive no matter the circumstance. She feared nothing and managed to find goodness in even the darkest of souls.

"So, here we are, not exactly neighbors-Byram Hills being about thirty-five hundred miles from Italy. I can't imagine you came all this way to borrow my snowblower."

Genevieve smiled at Michael, a soft laugh escaping her lips, but it quickly dissolved. "I need to ask something of you." She spoke quickly as if she had to get it out.

"Whatever you need."

"Please don't answer yet. I'm going to ask you to think upon what I am about to say."

"It's OK," Michael said softly, hearing the hesitancy in her voice. He tilted his head in sympathy; he had never heard her speak so ominously.

"There is a painting. It is my painting, Michael, something that has been in my family for a long time. It is one of only two works in existence by an obscure artist. I thought it lost but I have recently learned it has surfaced on the black market. It contains a family secret, one of great consequence."

Genevieve paused a moment as she resumed rubbing Hawk's belly. She stared at the dog as she continued. "It is not that I desire its return; in fact, I wish it to be destroyed before it is acquired by the one person who should never take possession of it."

Michael sat there, fully understanding she was asking him to commit a crime on her behalf. Michael looked at the envelope, at the blue cruciform of Genevieve's family crest, the moment seeming to drag on as the cold of the morning began to penetrate his core.

"I am being hunted, Michael. Hunted to unlock the secret of this work of art."

"What do you mean, hunted?" Michael said, a tinge of defensive anger seeping into his voice. He abruptly sat up, listening more intently.

"The man who is trying to acquire this painting has the darkest of hearts. A man without compassion, without remorse. He stops at nothing to achieve his ends.

No life is too consequential, no deed too unholy. He is desperate and, like a trapped animal that will chew off its own limbs to escape, a desperate man knows no limit, knows no boundary. And the path that he seeks, the path to where this painting will guide him, will only lead to death."

"How do you know?" Michael said. There was sympathy in his voice, without a trace of skepticism. "

How can you be sure you're not jumping to conclusions? To hunt another human being . . . Who could be so cold?"

"The man I speak of, it shames me to say, the man who hunts me"- Genevieve looked at Michael, her broken heart reflected in her eyes-"is my own son."

Michael sat there absorbing her words, not breaking eye contact. Her eyes, which had always been so strong, so confident, were now desperate, adrift like the eyes of a lost child.

Finally, Genevieve flipped open the brass clasp on her tan leather purse, reached in, and withdrew her car keys. She stood, brushing herself off, regaining her composure and dignity.

Michael silently rose, standing beside her, looking upon her. "I don't know what to say." Genevieve leaned in, kissed him softly on the cheek.

"Do not say a word. I am shamed by what I ask." She gently tapped the manila envelope in Michael's hand. "I understand if you decline; in fact, I hope you do. I'm foolish for coming here."

"Genevieve . . ." Michael began, but he was lost for words as she stepped back.

"I'll call you in a week," she said as she turned away.

Michael watched as she walked down the snowy walkway, entered her car, and drove off.

Over the following days, Michael thought on Genevieve's request: was it an overreaction, a paranoid response to a maternal love betrayed? The desperation in her eyes . . . it was so contrary to her personality as her words pled to his soul. While Michael's mind was filled with doubt, he did not question Genevieve's intent even once, for whatever the painting's significance, she believed in it with her entire being.

Genevieve's request had weighed heavy on Michael; she was asking him to reenter a world that he'd left far behind, that he hadn't known since Mary had passed away. A life he was happy to leave in memory of a wife whose morals were stronger than steel. Besides, his skills were rusty and his mind, he feared, had begun to lose its edge. She was asking him to not only steal a painting, but ensure that it would never fall into her son's possession.

Three days later, Michael picked up the phone to call her, to discuss it, to offer emotional support like she had offered him. He would save his polite decline for the end. She was asking him to break into a gallery that only existed on the black market, that was but a rumor heard on the wind. And even if he was to somehow find it in a dream, it would be nearly impenetrable.

But his heart skipped a beat when he found her phone disconnected. He hung up and immediately called Simon. Michael didn't need to hear the words; it was the tone of his friend's voice that said it all.

Genevieve was dead.

Belange was only a rumor in the art world. A firm that dealt in black-market, gray-market, off-market merchandise for the refined taste. Paintings, sculptures, jewelry, and antiques: items thought forever lost. An

organization dealing in legendary artifacts. But the rumor was actually fictitious.

Belange was a code name for Killian McShane. His was an organization of one; his place of business was actually ten addresses scattered throughout Switzerland and Amsterdam. While McShane was a true lover of art and it was his full-time occupation, not a single address bore any evidence of that fact. Each building was, in actuality, an elegant town house, its tenants leaning toward the financial services world. McShane would maintain a basement office in every address and would visit each location only twice a year.

McShane acted as a clandestine merchant for the art world's forgotten treasures, charging 15 percent on all transactions. His vow of secrecy and discretion was only exceeded by his security, and the security at 24, rue de Fleur was of the highest caliber. There were three guards at all times: at the main entrance, in the lobby, and on the rooftop. They were not your typical rent-a-cops.

McShane chose only former military police, those trained with the requisite skills to provide his dealings the appropriate level of protection. They were hired for their two greatest talents, detection and marksmanship, and instructed not to hesitate in using either at their discretion. The electronic measures employed were cutting edge, drawing on high-end military design and museum-level countermeasures, all unheard of unless you were conversant in the world of thieves.

Each painting or object to be traded was brought into the unmarked building under tight security and placed on display in a climate-controlled basement room secure for viewing. Upon completion of the negotiations, the monies were brought in and provided to McShane. Neither party to the transaction was ever aware of the other party's identity and even McShane would remain anonymous, working through intermediaries. Payment was strictly through bearer bonds, so as to avoid the inconvenient paper trail of banks. The bonds would be delivered and held for twenty-four hours for verification of validity. Upon completion of the time period, both the monies and the artwork would

be released to the parties in question without evidence of the transaction ever having taken place.

The sexual fireworks went off exactly as planned, the perfect distraction that lured the eyes of even the most steadfast roof guard away from his duty in the way that instinct has a primordial influence over even the most vigilant of minds. They were pyrotechnics of an intimate expression. Two ladies of the evening arrived on the neighboring rooftop that sat one story lower with a student in tow and, ignoring the chill of the night, removed their fur coats to reveal soft naked bodies of perfection. They turned on their boombox to a techno grind and proceeded to entertain the twenty-year-old in sensual ways he could never have imagined, all the while putting on a show for the lone voyeur on the windy roof across the alley.

Michael slipped over the far side parapet unbeknownst to the distracted and aroused guard. He had scaled the five-story town house, its evenly spaced granite blocks providing perfect finger- and toeholds. The elevator bulkhead supplied coverage as he silently opened his supply pack, and pulled out and secured a kernmantle climbing rope for a quick escape. He placed two large magnets at the top and base of the elevator bulkhead door, freezing the alarm arms in place, rendering them useless to indicate a breach. Michael made quick work of the door lock and slipped through, quietly pulling the door closed behind him without even a click. Through Genevieve's info and his considerable contacts in the underworld, Michael had been able to piece together Belange's current address and confirm the pending transaction. Purchasing the blueprints of the building proved far more trouble and he had only completed their review in the last hour.

Michael peered down the hundred-year-old dark elevator shaft; stale earthen odors wafted up, assaulting his senses. He pulled the spring-loaded descent cam from his bag and affixed it to the elevator frame that ran across the ceiling. He clipped his climbing harness to the descent line, checked the pack on his back, and silently dropped six stories into darkness. The cam dropped him at a rate of descent controlled by the remote in his hand. The cam was not so much for going down but for the quick rubber-band-like effect it would have as it pulled him out of the basement for his hopefully successful exit.