

A HIDDEN CODE. NINE STATIONS. ONE UNIVERSAL TRUTH.

12+



IX-III-I-X

THE GENIUS CODE

— S E R I E S —

BOOK I-

RAPHAEL'S CODE

MYRON BREITMAN

Myron Breitman

**The Genius Code —
Book I — Raphael's Code**

«Издательские решения»

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The Genius Code — Book I — Raphael's Code / M. Breitman —
«Издательские решения»,

A murdered professor.. A code hidden in the art of Raphael. In this gripping art-history thriller, scholars Miriam and Andrea plunge into a deadly conspiracy following a professor's murder in the Vatican. Their quest? To decipher the Codex Perspectivae, a geometric code hidden by Raphael across Rome's architecture. Racing a ruthless secret society, they must unlock the city's ancient soul before the truth is lost. A masterful blend of Renaissance history and mystery!

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The Genius Code — Book I — Raphael's Code

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PROLOGUE — The Silenced Circle

Rome, 23:47

Professor Simone Albi knew he would die tonight.

Not because he believed in omens — in forty years of scholarly work he had learned to trust only facts. But when the heavy oak door of the Apostolic Library closed behind him with a dull click, the echo in the corridor rang out like a verdict.

The manuscript was in his bag. Forbidden. Nonexistent, according to every official catalogue. The very one he had been searching for these past eight years.

Codex Perspectivae Raphaelis.

His fingers gripped the worn leather handle of his briefcase so tightly his knuckles went white. His heart was pounding somewhere in his throat. Ahead — fifty meters of marble corridor, lit only by emergency lamps. Then — the side exit through the Cortile del Papagallo. A taxi. A hotel. In the morning — a flight to Zurich, where Miriam Klein was waiting for him, the only person capable of understanding what he had found.

Albi took a step. Then another.

The silence of the Vatican at night is not merely the absence of sound. It is the presence of something ancient, watching, waiting. The professor adjusted his glasses and quickened his pace.

To his left, the busts of Roman pontiffs stood frozen in the dimness. To his right — a stained-glass window depicting Saint Peter, whose empty glass eyes seemed to follow his every movement. Albi found himself recalling the words of his late mentor: “*Simone, there are truths the Vatican guards not with prayers, but with silence.*”

Now he understood what he had meant.

The manuscript in his bag was not merely a historical document. It was a map. An instruction. A key to a system that Raphael Santi had built five hundred years ago — a system that turned Rome into a colossal machine of meaning, where every fresco, every building, every piazza was a piece of one grand code.

A code capable of changing humanity's understanding of art, of architecture, of reality itself.

Albi had nearly reached the side exit when he heard footsteps behind him.

Soft. Measured. Inevitable.

He turned.

There was no one in the corridor. Only shadows and the flicker of lamps reflected in the polished marble. But the professor could feel a gaze — heavy, piercing, coming from somewhere in the darkness between the columns.

— *Professore Albi.*

The voice was quiet, almost polite. No accent. No emotion.

Simone spun around sharply. Before him, as though materialized out of thin air, stood a man in a dark suit. A face — ordinary, forgettable within seconds. Hands — folded in front of him. But the eyes...

The eyes were empty.

— You have taken something that does not belong to you, — the man continued, stepping forward. — The Codex must remain here. Forever.

Albi backed away, clutching the bag to his chest.

— You don't understand... this isn't a religious secret. It is *knowledge*. It belongs to the world, to science, to the people!

— Knowledge that would destroy too much, — the man answered calmly. — Some truths must remain hidden. Not to protect faith. To protect order.

— What *order*? — the professor gasped, backing toward the door. — Raphael did not create a secret! He created a *revelation*!

The man tilted his head, as if regretting the inevitable.

— You are mistaken, professore. Raphael created both. And the second is more dangerous.

Albi was no longer listening. He lunged for the door, snatched out his key card, swiped it through the reader. Red light. *Access denied*.

Panic.

He turned — the man was already two steps away.

— Please... — the professor whispered. — Give me...

But in the next instant something cold and sharp touched his ribs. One strike. Precise. Professional. No wasted movement.

Albi collapsed to his knees, pressing a hand to his side. Blood. So much blood. The bag slipped from his fingers and fell onto the marble with a dull thud.

The man in black picked up the briefcase, opened it, took out the manuscript. He leafed through a few pages, as though verifying its authenticity. Nodded. Then carefully returned the codex and set the bag down beside the dying professor.

— Why... — Albi rasped, feeling his life ebbing away. — Why are you leaving it with me?

The man leaned down, and his voice grew almost gentle:

— Because you are already dead, professore. And the dead do not talk.

He straightened and dissolved into the darkness as silently as he had appeared.

Simone Albi was alone now. Blood spread across the white marble, forming a dark stain like an opening flower.

No. Not like this. Not now.

His last strength. His last chance.

With a trembling hand he pulled a notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket. A page. One page — that was all he had left.

He drew a triangle. Inside it — dots. One. Three. Six. Ten.

The Tetractys.

Beneath the drawing, with his last remaining strength, the professor traced out in shaking letters:

RAPHAELIS: IX — III — I—X

Nine. Three. One. Ten.

A code. Coordinates. A key.

Miriam would understand.

She had to understand.

Simone Albi closed his eyes, pressing the note to his chest. Somewhere in the distance he could hear the voices of Swiss Guards hurrying toward the sound of the fallen body.

But it was already too late.

The professor lay at the entrance to the Apostolic Library — the very place where, five hundred years earlier, according to legend, Raphael Santi had first shown Pope Julius II his first sketches for the Stanze.

The circle had closed. Or had only just begun to open.

CHAPTER 1 — Contours of Silence

*Rome, Villa Medici
Three days later, 10:15*

Miriam Klein hated conferences.

Not the speaking itself — she loved talking about art. Not her colleagues — many of them were brilliant scholars. She hated the *ritual*: the polite applause, the obligatory questions, the coffee breaks where everyone discussed everything except what actually mattered.

Right now she stood by the tall window of the Aurora Hall, looking out at the villa's gardens, thinking about the letter.

The letter from Simone Albi had arrived two weeks ago. Short. Urgent. Almost panicked in tone — which was entirely out of character for the meticulous professor she had been corresponding with for the past three years.

*“Miriam, I have found what I was looking for.
The Codex Perspectivae — it is real.
And it changes everything.
We need to meet. Urgently. Tell no one.
Come to Rome for your conference.
Simone.”*

She had answered right away. Confirmed the dates. But Albi never wrote back.

Twelve days of silence.

Miriam ran a hand over her hair, gathered into a severe knot. Forty-two years old, professor of art history at the University of Zurich, specialist in Renaissance iconographic codes. Twenty publications. One monograph on symbolism in Botticelli's work. She was used to precision, logic, facts.

But these last few days something had been *wrong*.

Albi wasn't the type to simply vanish. Not even when absorbed in research.

— Dr. Klein?

She turned. Behind her stood a man of about thirty-five — tall, in a tweed jacket with elbow patches, dark hair carelessly tousled, attentive brown eyes. In his hands — a tablet and a cup of espresso.

— Andrea Rossi, — he introduced himself, with a light Italian accent. — Sapienza University of Rome. Architectural history. I just heard your lecture. Brilliant.

— Thank you, — Miriam answered cautiously.

Compliments at conferences usually preceded either criticism or a request for co-authorship. But something in his gaze was... sincere.

— Especially the part about the hidden axes in Raphael's compositions, — Andrea went on, taking a sip of his coffee. — You said that *The School of Athens* is built not merely according to the laws of perspective, but on the principle of architectural projection. Like a building transposed onto a wall.

Miriam nodded. It was her favorite subject.

— Raphael wasn't just a painter. He thought like an architect. Every fresco is a spatial model.

— Exactly! — Andrea brightened. — I work on something similar. Only from the other direction — I study how Rome's architecture influenced the compositions of the frescoes. The axes of the streets, the proportions of the buildings, the sightlines... You know, sometimes it seems Raphael didn't just *look at* the city. He... *read* it. Like a text.

Miriam felt something stir inside her.

Read the city like a text.

That was precisely what Albi had said three years ago: *“Raphael read Rome not with his eyes, but with geometry.”*

— Signor Rossi...

— Andrea, please.

— Andrea. — She paused. — Do you happen to know Professor Simone Albi?

Andrea's face changed. His smile softened, but something like sorrow appeared in his eyes.

— I do. Simone is a remarkable scholar. Though... these past six months he's become very secretive. Stopped publishing. Barely answered letters. Said he was busy with “the great discovery of his life.” — Andrea shrugged. — Do you work with him?

— We correspond, — Miriam answered evasively. — Or rather, we used to. He disappeared two weeks ago. Doesn't answer.

Andrea frowned.

— Strange. Though, knowing Simone... when he throws himself headfirst into research, he can go silent for weeks. Once he spent three months studying a single fragment of a fresco in the Sistine Chapel. Every day. Six hours at a time.

— What was he looking for?

— A vanishing point, — Andrea smiled wryly. — In the perspective Michelangelo supposedly hid within the composition. Simone was convinced that the great masters left messages in the geometry of their works.

Miriam felt her heart beat faster.

— And did he find it?

— No. Or rather, he never got the chance to prove it. The Vatican cut off his access after he tried to take measurements of the chapel at an improper hour. — Andrea shook his head. — Simone is a genius, but sometimes he gets a little too... carried away.

Or he isn't carried away at all. Perhaps he finds what others don't want to see.

— Are you presenting today? — Miriam asked, changing the subject.

— At four, — Andrea nodded. — A paper on Bramante's axes in the layout of the Belvedere Courtyard. Rather dull subject, to be honest. — He smiled. — But if you're interested, I'd be glad to see you in the hall.

— I'll be there, — Miriam promised.

Somewhere in the depths of the villa, a bell rang. The break was over.

Andrea finished his espresso and set the cup on the windowsill.

— It was a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Klein. I hope we'll talk more about Raphael. I have a few hypotheses I think you might like.

— I'd be delighted, — Miriam answered, extending her hand.

He shook it — firm, warm, confident — and headed for the exit.

Miriam watched him go, then turned back to the window.

Rome lay below, drenched in midday sun. The Eternal City. A city of secrets, encoded in stone, in paint, in proportion.

Somewhere down there, in that labyrinth of streets and palaces, was Simone Albi.

Alive or dead.

With the codex or without it.

Miriam took out her phone and opened his last letter again.

“The Codex Perspectivae — it is real. And it changes everything.”

She closed her eyes.

Tomorrow — a meeting with the conference organizers. The day after — her second talk.

But tonight she would go to the Vatican. To the Apostolic Library.
To where Albi had worked.
To where the answers must be.
Outside the window, Rome breathed history, secrets, and beauty.
And somewhere in its depths, in the shadow of cathedrals and palazzos, the truth was hiding.
Miriam intended to find it.

CHAPTER 2 — A Hand in Stone

Rome, Villa Medici 14:30

Miriam sat in the back row of the conference hall, but she didn't hear a single word.

On stage, a professor from the University of Florence was talking about the influence of Neoplatonism on Botticelli's compositions. The slides changed one after another: *Primavera*, *The Birth of Venus*, diagrams of the golden ratio. Ordinary academic routine.

But Miriam was thinking about something else.

About Albi's letter. About the codex. About twelve days of silence.

She opened her laptop and checked her email once more.

Nothing.

Then — messaging apps, her phone, even the old art-history forum where Albi sometimes posted notes.

Silence.

This is wrong.

Simone Albi was a man of habit. He answered letters within a day. Published articles every three months. Kept a meticulous online research journal.

And now — total silence.

Miriam dialed the number for his department at the University of Rome. Long rings. An answering machine.

"You have reached the Department of Art History. All staff are currently unavailable. Please leave a message after the tone."

She hung up without leaving one.

On stage, the lecturer finished his talk. Applause. Questions from the floor. Miriam mechanically snapped her laptop shut and stood.

She needed air.

She walked out into the corridor, past the stands of new book releases and exhibition posters, pushed open a heavy door, and stepped out onto the terrace.

Rome lay below, drenched in the afternoon sun. Domes, cypresses, red tiled roofs. The Eternal City, which had watched empires, popes, painters, and geniuses be born and die.

— Dr. Klein?

She turned. Andrea Rossi stood by a column, phone in hand. His face was pale.

— Have you heard already? — he asked quietly.

— What?

Andrea held out his phone to her.

On the screen — a news site, *La Repubblica*. A large headline:

TRAGEDY AT THE VATICAN: PROFESSOR MURDERED IN THE APOSTOLIC LIBRARY

Miriam felt the ground go out from under her.

She took the phone with trembling hands and began to read.

The article reported that a professor of Renaissance art in his late fifties had been found dead in the Vatican overnight, his body discovered near the entrance to the Apostolic Library around midnight, with a stab wound cited as the preliminary cause of death; police were treating robbery as one possible line of inquiry, a Vatican spokesperson noted that the professor had been authorized to work in the archives and was in the building legally, and the investigation was said to be ongoing.

Miriam closed her eyes.

No.

No, no, no.

— Miriam? — Andrea called out cautiously. — Are you all right?

She opened her eyes and looked at him. There was something in her gaze that made him take a step back.

— This wasn't a robbery, — she said flatly.

— How do you know?

— Because Albi found what he was looking for. And he wrote to me about it two weeks ago. Andrea frowned.

— What are you talking about?

Miriam took out her phone, opened Albi's letter, and showed it to him.

Andrea read in silence, and with every line his face grew more serious.

— The Codex Perspectivae, — he whispered, once he'd finished. — My God. He really found it.

— You know what that is?

Andrea nodded, leaning against the balustrade.

— A legend. One of the most famous myths among art historians. Supposedly, before his death, Raphael wrote a treatise on perspective and geometry — but not an ordinary one, but... — he hesitated, searching for words. — The Codex Perspectivae was said to contain a system. A way of *embedding* meanings into architecture and painting so they'd function as a single whole. Like... like some vast machine of images.

— A machine of images?

— Imagine, — Andrea spoke faster now, caught up in the idea. — The city as a text. Every building — a word. Every street — a sentence. And the frescoes on the walls — punctuation marks, setting the rhythm and the meaning. Raphael, if the legend is to be believed, understood this better than anyone. And he tried to build a system by which the city itself could *speak*.

Miriam listened without looking away.

— But the codex was thought lost. Most scholars don't even believe it ever existed. No mentions in any documents, no trace of it at all...

— Until now, — Miriam cut in. — Albi found it. And they killed him.

Silence.

The wind stirred the cypress leaves in the villa's garden. Somewhere below, in the city, cars honked, street vendors called out, tourists laughed.

Life went on.

And Simone Albi no longer existed.

— What are we going to do? — Andrea asked quietly.

Miriam looked at him.

— Do you want to help?

— Simone was my friend, — Andrea said simply. — Not a close one, but... he helped me when I was just starting out. Gave me access to his archives, introduced me to the right people. If he found something important, I want to know what it was. And I want to know who killed him.

Miriam nodded.

— Then we need to get into the Apostolic Library.

— Now? There will be police there for certain.

— That's exactly why now, — Miriam said. — While the evidence is still fresh. Before anything that might have been left is cleared away.

Andrea checked his watch.

— The cordon comes down in an hour. I have a contact in the Vatican administration — he can get us in as consultants.

— Consultants?

— The police asked for help from art history specialists. To understand exactly what Albi was searching for in the archives. — Andrea gave a crooked smile. — I can recommend the two of us.

Miriam studied him for a long moment.

— You understand we'd be walking into something very dangerous?

— I understand.

— Albi wasn't killed for no reason. Someone didn't want the codex to become public knowledge.

— I understand, — Andrea repeated. — But if we don't try to find out the truth, his death will have meant nothing. And I can't accept that.

Miriam nodded slowly.

— All right. When can we get in?

— I'll call now. I think I can arrange everything by six this evening.

He took out his phone and stepped to the edge of the terrace, dialing a number.

Miriam was left alone.

She opened Albi's letter again and reread the last line:

"The Codex Perspectivae — it is real. And it changes everything."

What did you find, Simone?

And who was so afraid of it that they killed you?

Behind her, Andrea's voice rang out:

— Done. Six this evening. Main entrance. Inspector Giuliani of the Vatican police will meet us.

Miriam turned.

— Thank you.

— Don't mention it, — Andrea paused, then added more quietly: — Miriam... if we really do find something important... are you prepared for the consequences?

She looked out at Rome, spread out below. A city that had guarded Raphael's secret for five hundred years.

A city that had just killed a man for getting too close to the answer.

— I'm prepared, — she said. — Are you?

Andrea nodded.

— Yes. I'm prepared.

They stood on the terrace of the Villa Medici, two scholars who, in a few hours, would walk into the place where a murder had been committed.

And begin searching for the thing that had cost a man his life.

Raphael's code.

The key to a secret hidden in the very heart of Rome.

A key that had been hunted for centuries.

And one that, perhaps, was never meant to be found.

CHAPTER 3 — The Invisible Cross

Vatican, Apostolic Library 18:05

Inspector Carlo Giuliani was a man who had seen too much.

Fifty-eight years old, gray hair, a severe dark suit, and eyes that had no room left for surprise. Thirty years in the Vatican gendarmerie had taught him not to ask unnecessary questions and not to trust simple answers.

— Dr. Klein, Signor Rossi, — he shook their hands at the library entrance. — Thank you for agreeing to help. We need specialists who understand what Professor Albi was working on.

— We knew him, — Miriam said quietly. — It's the least we can do.

Giuliani nodded and led them inside.

At night, the Apostolic Library resembled a cathedral — high vaults, silence, the smell of old paper and incense. But now that silence was broken by the flashes of forensic cameras and the hushed voices of police officers.

They crossed the main hall, passing shelves of manuscripts more than a thousand years old, and stopped at a side corridor.

A chalk outline of a human figure had been drawn on the floor.

Miriam felt her throat tighten.

Here. Right here he died.

— The body was discovered at 23:47, — Giuliani began, taking out a notebook. — A Swiss Guard heard the sound of a fall and came running. Professor Albi was still alive, but unconscious. The ambulance arrived eight minutes later. He died on the way to the hospital.

— Cause of death? — Andrea asked.

— A single stab wound. Precise. Professional. Between the ribs, straight to the heart. — Giuliani looked at them. — This wasn't a random brawl. The killer knew what he was doing.

Miriam swept her eyes over the corridor. No signs of a struggle. No disorder. Only the chalk figure on the marble floor and a dark bloodstain that had already been mostly wiped away.

— Was anything stolen? — she asked.

— That's the strange part, — Giuliani frowned. — Nothing. The professor still had his watch, his wallet with cash and credit cards, his phone. Even his briefcase was still on him.

— His briefcase? — Andrea asked sharply. — What was in it?

Giuliani produced a clear evidence bag. Inside — a worn leather bag.

— A notebook, pens, glasses, a coffee thermos. And this.

He showed them another bag. Inside lay a page torn from the notebook, stained with blood.

Miriam stepped closer.

On the page — a drawing. A triangle divided into rows of dots. One dot at the top, three beneath it, six below that, ten at the base.

The Tetractys.

The sacred symbol of the Pythagoreans. The sum of the first four numbers: $1+2+3+4=10$. Perfection. Harmony. The order of the universe.

But beneath the drawing was an inscription, written in a trembling hand:

RAPHAELIS: IX — III — I—X

— We thought it might be the killer's name, — Giuliani said. — But no Raphael turns up in any of our databases. Then we wondered if it was a cipher. Or coordinates. Perhaps you recognize something?

Miriam couldn't tear her eyes from the symbol.

Nine. Three. One. Ten.

What were you trying to tell us, Simone?

— It isn't a name, — she said slowly. — And it isn't coordinates. It's... an instruction.

— An instruction? — the inspector repeated.

— To a code, — Andrea cut in, looking at the drawing. — Raphael used numerical sequences in his compositions. Proportions, distances between figures, angles of perspective. Everything governed by mathematics.

— Are you saying this drawing is a key to something in his work?

— Possibly, — Miriam crouched down to see the inscription better. — Roman numerals. IX — nine. III — three. I — one. X — ten.

— Could they be dates? — Giuliani suggested.

— No, — Andrea shook his head. — Too strange a sequence for dates. But for Raphael... — he trailed off, staring intently at the symbol. — Nine points, three axes, one centre... my God.

— What? — Miriam stood. — What have you worked out?

Andrea took out his phone and quickly typed something. He showed them the screen.

An image of *The School of Athens* — Raphael's most famous fresco in the Vatican.

— Look, — he zoomed in on the central section. — The philosophers are arranged in groups. Nine principal figures. Three axes of composition — a vertical one through Plato and Aristotle, a horizontal one along the steps, a diagonal one through the perspective. And one vanishing point right at the centre.

Miriam stared at the image, and suddenly it all fell into place.

— Nine points, three lines, one centre, ten... — she trailed off. — Ten levels in the building in the fresco. The architecture recedes in ten tiers.

— You think Albi found something in *The School of Athens*? — Giuliani asked.

— Not in the fresco itself, — Andrea said slowly. — In how it relates to the real space around it. The Stanza della Segnatura, where *The School of Athens* is located, was built according to specific proportions. Raphael accounted for them when he designed the composition. The fresco isn't just an image. It's a projection. An architectural model built into the room itself.

Miriam felt the pieces lining up into a chain.

— The Codex Perspectivae, — she whispered. — Albi found the treatise on how Raphael encoded meaning into architecture through painting. It isn't just a manual on perspective. It's an instruction manual.

— An instruction manual for what?

— For reading the city, — Andrea answered. — If Raphael's frescoes correspond to real spaces in Rome, then the city itself can be read like a text. You could find the hidden axes, the intersections, the points...

— ...and they'd lead somewhere, — Miriam finished. — To whatever Raphael wanted to say. But not in words. In geometry.

Giuliani watched them, clearly following only half of what was said.

— Fine. Let's say the professor found this... codex. And realized some kind of system was hidden in Raphael's frescoes. Why kill him for that?

Miriam and Andrea exchanged a glance.

— We don't know, — Miriam answered honestly. — Not yet.

— Then I suggest we start with what we do know, — the inspector said. — The professor had submitted a request for archive access. He was looking for a specific document. — Giuliani took out a printout. — Here's the request: "Manuscript B-451, sixteenth-century section, private collection of Cardinal Bibbiena."

— Bibbiena, — Andrea repeated. — Secretary to Pope Leo X. And a close friend of Raphael's.

— Precisely, — Giuliani nodded. — Albi received clearance, spent four hours in the archive, then tried to leave the building. He was stopped at the exit. His bag was searched. Nothing prohibited was found. He was allowed through. An hour later, he was found dead.

— So the killer was waiting for him inside, — Miriam said. — Knew Albi was here. Knew his route. And managed to disappear before the guards arrived.

— But why kill him if there was nothing in the briefcase? — Giuliani spread his hands. — If this was a theft of the manuscript, the killer should have taken it.

— Maybe he did, — Andrea said quietly. — Maybe Albi had already managed to hide the codex somewhere. Or... — he stopped.

— Or what?

— Or the killer never intended to steal it at all. He just wanted Albi silenced.

Silence.

The corridor felt cold, despite the warm evening air outside.

— We need to examine the archives, — Miriam said. — See exactly what Albi was studying. Manuscript B-451.

Giuliani checked his watch.

— The archives are closed. They won't open until tomorrow morning.

— Then tomorrow, — Miriam said insistently. — This matters.

The inspector was quiet for a moment, then nodded.

— All right. I'll arrange it with the keeper. Nine in the morning. But understand this — this is an official investigation. Whatever you find must be handed over to the police.

— Of course, — Andrea agreed.

But Miriam saw in his eyes the same thing she felt herself.

They would hand nothing over.

Not until they understood exactly what Simone Albi had found.

And why it had cost him his life.

Villa Farnesina, Trastevere 20:30

They drove in silence.

Andrea steered his battered Fiat through the narrow streets of Trastevere, weaving between parked cars and mopeds. Outside the window, the facades of old palazzos flashed by, lit by streetlamps, restaurant terraces spilling over with laughter and the clink of glasses.

Rome was living its ordinary life.

But Miriam saw it differently now.

Every building seemed part of a puzzle. Every street a line in some vast blueprint. Every piazza a point where meanings intersected.

Raphael had rebuilt Rome with geometry.

But why?

— We're here, — Andrea said, parking near the bank of the Tiber.

The Villa Farnesina stood surrounded by its garden, its pale-yellow facade glowing in the evening dusk. A Renaissance jewel, built for the wealthy banker Agostino Chigi. The finest painters of the age had worked here.

Including Raphael.

— How are we going to get in? — Miriam asked. — The museum's already closed.

Andrea smiled and produced a ring of keys.

— I'm a restoration consultant. I have access.

They went in through a side door, climbed a narrow staircase, and found themselves in the Loggia of Psyche — an open gallery whose vaults were painted with scenes from classical myth.

But Andrea led Miriam further, into the adjoining hall.

And there, on the wall, it was waiting for them.

The Triumph of Galatea.

The fresco glowed even in the half-light. The sea nymph Galatea rides her shell chariot, drawn by dolphins. Around her — tritons, nereids, cupids. All the figures move in a circle, creating a sense of rotation, of dance, of cosmic harmony.

Miriam stood frozen, looking at the fresco.

She had seen it dozens of times. In books, on slides, in reproductions. But here, in person, in the soft light spilling from hidden lamps, *The Triumph of Galatea* was... different.

— What's troubling you? — Andrea asked quietly, standing beside her.

— The perspective, — Miriam whispered, not taking her eyes off it. — It's wrong.

— Wrong how?

Miriam stepped closer to the fresco, studying the details.

— Galatea moves in a circle. All the figures rotate around her. But the vanishing point... — she raised a hand, pointing at the centre of the composition. — The vanishing point isn't on Galatea. It's shifted. Down and to the left.

Andrea took out his tablet, opened a photograph of the fresco, and laid a perspective grid over it.

A few seconds of silence.

Then he breathed out:

— You're right. The vanishing point is shifted twenty degrees. That's... that can't be an accident. Raphael didn't make mistakes like that.

— It's not a mistake, — Miriam said. — It's a *choice*.

She circled the fresco, studying it from different angles.

And then she saw it.

— Andrea. Stand right here.

Andrea walked to the spot she indicated — three meters from the fresco, slightly left of centre.

— Look at Galatea. Straight into her eyes.

He looked.

And went still.

— She's... looking at me.

— Not at you. *Through* you, — Miriam came to stand beside him. — The vanishing point isn't on the fresco. It's in real space. Raphael built the composition so the viewer would become part of it.

Andrea slowly turned, looking at the hall behind him.

— And where does that axis point?

Miriam took a compass from her bag and checked the direction.

— East. Straight across the Tiber. Toward... — she pulled up a map of Rome on her phone and overlaid the line. — Toward the Vatican.

— The Stanza della Segnatura, — Andrea whispered. — *The School of Athens*.

They looked at each other.

An invisible line. An axis connecting two of Raphael's frescoes, separated by a river and a kilometer of distance.

A line that had existed for five hundred years, but that no one had ever seen.

Until today.

— Albi knew about this, — Miriam said slowly. — He found the axes. And he started mapping them.

— And then someone killed him, — Andrea finished.

Miriam looked at the fresco again.

At Galatea, racing on in her eternal dance.

At the cupids, whose arrows pointed not simply toward the sky, but at specific points in the composition.

At the geometry hidden behind the beauty.

— This is only the beginning, — she said quietly. — One axis isn't a system yet. We need to find the rest.

— Nine points, three axes, one centre, — Andrea repeated the words from Albi's note.

— Tomorrow we examine the manuscript in the archives, — Miriam said. — And tonight...

— Tonight we measure this fresco, — Andrea finished. — Every line. Every angle. Every point.

He pulled a laser rangefinder and a notebook from his backpack.

Miriam smiled.

— You came prepared.

— I'm an architect, — Andrea shrugged. — I always carry my tools.

They worked in silence, recording numbers, angles, proportions.

Outside the window, Rome sank into night.

And in a hall of the Villa Farnesina, two scholars untangled a thread that Raphael had drawn out across the centuries.

An invisible cross.

An axis of meaning.

A code written not in words, but in geometry.

A code that had already been paid for in blood.

CHAPTER 4 — Raphael's Golden Number

Vatican, Archives of the Apostolic Library

09:15, the next morning

The keeper of the archives, Monsignor Antonio Berti, resembled his own books — old, fragile, but full of hidden strength.

Seventy years old, a white beard, thin wire-rimmed glasses, and hands that moved among the ancient manuscripts with a surgeon's care. For forty years he had served in these halls, where the dust of centuries settled on pages that guarded the secrets of popes, saints, and heretics.

— Manuscript B-451, — he repeated, leading Miriam and Andrea through a labyrinth of shelves. — Professor Albi was very insistent. It took three requests and a personal recommendation from the dean to gain access.

— Why? — Miriam asked. — Is the document classified?

— No, simply... forgotten, — Berti stopped at a narrow passage between the shelves. — Cardinal Bibbiena's collection came to the Vatican in 1520, after his death. Most of it has been catalogued. But this manuscript... it wasn't entered into the inventory until the 1890s. And no one has requested it since. Until Professor Albi.

He took out a set of keys and opened a glass cabinet. Inside, on a velvet cushion, lay a slim book bound in leather darkened by age.

Berti carefully lifted it and set it on a special table with soft lighting.

— Be careful. Sixteenth-century paper. Very fragile.

Miriam put on white gloves and slowly opened the manuscript.

The first page — a title page. A Latin inscription in a clear hand:

CODEX PERSPECTIVAE RAPHAELIS SANCTII URBINATIS De Architectura Invisibili et Proportione Urbis Aeternae

The Codex of Perspective of Raphael Santi of Urbino. On the Invisible Architecture and Proportions of the Eternal City.

Andrea let out a breath, as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

— This is it. The real codex.

Miriam turned the page.

A diagram. A geometric schema of circles, lines, and points. At the centre — the plan of a building resembling the Pantheon. Axes radiated out from it, intersecting with other buildings on a map of Rome.

— He mapped the city, — Miriam whispered. — He built a network of invisible lines.

The next page — Latin text. Miriam read slowly, translating aloud, explaining that the passage described architecture as the body of a city while perspective was its soul — that just as a painter embeds meaning in a composition through a vanishing point, a wise city-builder embeds meaning in a city through axes of significance, so that a building is never merely a wall and a roof, but a point on a map bound by invisible threads to other points, and when those threads form a true geometry, the city begins to speak.

Andrea bent over the manuscript, studying the diagrams.

— Look. Here's the Pantheon, here's Santa Maria del Popolo, here's the Villa Farnesina. All connected by lines. They form... — he trailed off, counting the points. — Nine principal nodes.

— Nine points, — Miriam repeated, recalling Albi's note. — The first number in the code.

She turned further. Page after page — diagrams, schemas, calculations. Raphael hadn't merely written a treatise on art. He had written an *instruction manual*.

How to read the city.

How to see the hidden axes.

How to understand that buildings weren't random objects, but notes in a vast symphony of space.

— This one, — Andrea pointed to one of the diagrams. — The plan of the Stanza della Segnatura. The room where *The School of Athens* is.

Miriam leaned closer.

The plan showed not only the outline of the hall, but a schema of the fresco. Raphael had overlaid the geometry of the composition onto the geometry of the room. The vanishing point of the perspective coincided with the centre of the vaulted ceiling. The figures of the philosophers stood exactly where the axes of the walls intersected the diagonals of the floor.

— He built the fresco into the architecture, — Andrea whispered. — Like an equation. Every figure a variable. Every line a function.

— And what if we solved that equation? — Miriam asked quietly.

They looked at each other.

— We need to get into the Stanza, — Andrea said. — Now. With instruments.

Monsignor Berti, standing to one side, raised an eyebrow.

— Raphael's Stanze are open to tourists only until five in the evening. And photography is forbidden there.

— We're not tourists, — Miriam said. — We're researchers assisting the police in the investigation of Professor Albi's murder.

Berti was quiet for a moment, then sighed.

— I'll call the director of the Vatican Museums. Let's see what can be done.

Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura 11:30

The tourists were cleared out ten minutes before closing, on the pretext of "technical maintenance." The guards remained at the entrance but didn't interfere.

Miriam and Andrea stood at the centre of the hall, beneath the dome painted with the allegories of Theology, Philosophy, Poetry, and Law.

And around them, on all four walls, Raphael's frescoes unfolded.

The School of Athens on one wall. Plato and Aristotle walking down the steps, surrounded by the greatest minds of antiquity.

The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament on the opposite wall. Saints and church fathers debating the mystery of the Eucharist, while above them, in the heavens, Christ and the Virgin look on.

Parnassus — Apollo and the muses on the sacred mountain of poetry.

The Cardinal and Theological Virtues — allegorical figures of Wisdom, Strength, and Temperance.

Four frescoes. Four cardinal directions. Four domains of human knowledge.

— This isn't mere decoration, — Andrea said, slowly turning in place. — This is a cosmos. A model of the universe, built into a room.

Miriam took out her laser rangefinder and began taking measurements.

The distance from the centre of the hall to each fresco. The height of the ceiling. The angles of the diagonals. The proportions of the window openings.

The numbers arranged themselves into a sequence.

— The golden ratio, — she whispered, looking at the results. — Everywhere. Every distance is a multiple of 1.618. Every angle obeys this proportion.

Andrea switched on the projector he'd brought and aimed it at the wall. A grid appeared over the image of *The School of Athens*.

— Look. If we overlay the geometry of the golden ratio on the composition...

The figures of the philosophers fell right onto the nodes of the grid. Plato and Aristotle stood at the points where the diagonals crossed. Pythagoras, bent over his book in the lower left, sat at the lower golden node. Euclid, on the right, sat at the right one.

— This isn't chance, — Miriam said. — Raphael placed them like chess pieces. Each in its exact spot.

— But why? — Andrea zoomed in on the image of Pythagoras. — What was he trying to show?

Miriam moved closer to the fresco. Pythagoras sat on the steps, holding a tablet with a diagram in front of him. On the tablet — a diagram of musical intervals. The octave, the fifth, the fourth.

But beneath the diagram...

— Zoom in, — she asked.

Andrea aimed the projector at the fragment.

There, barely visible, drawn with a fine brush, was another schema.

The Tetractys.

Ten points arranged in a triangle.

Exactly like the one on Albi's note.

— He left a message, — Miriam breathed. — Right there on the fresco. Five hundred years ago.

— But what do the numbers mean? — Andrea looked again at the code: IX — III — I—X.
— Nine, three, one, ten.

Miriam walked around the hall, counting the figures in each fresco.

— *The School of Athens* — nine central figures. The principal philosophers.

— *The Disputation* — three tiers of composition, — Andrea picked up. — Earth, sky, the divine sphere.

— *Parnassus* — one central figure. Apollo.

— And *The Cardinal Virtues*... — Andrea quickly counted the figures in the fresco. — Ten figures.

They fell silent.

Nine. Three. One. Ten.

Not coordinates. Not dates.

Instructions for reading the frescoes.

— He built a sequence, — Miriam said slowly. — An order in which these compositions are meant to be read. Not left to right. Not clockwise. But in a specific sequence that unlocks a hidden meaning.

Andrea took out his tablet and began making rapid notes.

— If you start with *The School of Athens*, take the nine central figures... then move to *The Disputation* and trace the three axes... then to *Parnassus* and its single centre point... and finish with *The Cardinal Virtues* and its ten figures...

— What do we get? — Miriam asked.

— A route, — Andrea answered. — A visual route through the hall. The viewer's gaze moves from one fresco to another, from point to point, and...

He stopped, staring at the tablet screen.

On the screen — a diagram of the hall with lines of sight overlaid, connecting the figures across the different frescoes according to the code.

The lines formed a shape.

A perfect tetractys.

Ten points, joined by invisible axes running right through the space of the hall itself.

— My God, — Miriam whispered. — He turned the room into a geometric model. The frescoes aren't just paintings. They're a projection. A three-dimensional schema, built into the architecture.

— And the centre of the tetractys, — Andrea zoomed the diagram in, — is right here.

He pointed to a spot on the floor of the hall. Exactly in the middle, beneath the dome.

They walked to the spot.

A marble floor, smooth, with nothing marking it out. But when Miriam stood exactly at the centre and raised her eyes, she saw it.

The painted dome above her resolved into a new image. The four allegories — Theology, Philosophy, Poetry, Law — were arranged so that their gazes converged on a single point.

Directly above the head of the viewer standing at the centre.

— The vanishing point of the entire room, — Andrea whispered. — Raphael didn't build it into the fresco. He built it into real space. And the viewer becomes part of the composition. He is the tenth point. The completion of the tetractys.

Miriam slowly lowered her eyes.

If this room was a model...

If Raphael had applied the same system to other buildings...

— The city, — she breathed. — All of Rome is one gigantic Stanza. And somewhere in it there's a central point. A place where all the axes converge.

Andrea looked at her.

— Did Albi find it?

— I don't know, — Miriam took out her phone and photographed the tetractys diagram. — But now we know how to look.

At that moment a guard entered the hall.

— Signori, forgive me, but we need to close up. A delegation tour begins in five minutes.

— Of course, — Andrea nodded, packing up the equipment.

They left the Stanza, but Miriam turned back at the threshold.

Raphael's frescoes glowed in the soft daylight filtering through the windows. Plato and Aristotle walked the steps of eternity. The saints contemplated the divine mystery. Apollo played his lyre for the muses.

But now Miriam saw more than beauty.

She saw a code.

A system.

A machine of meaning, running for five hundred years.

And she understood why Simone Albi had been killed.

Because he had begun to uncover it.

And someone was determined that the world would never learn the truth.

The truth about what Raphael had hidden in the very heart of Rome.

**Trattoria Da Luciano,
near the Vatican, 13:00**

They sat at a corner table, plates of carbonara in front of them, untouched.

Miriam spread out the archive photographs and her notes.

— So, here's what we have, — she began. — Raphael built a system of hidden axes, linking buildings and frescoes into a single geometric network. The Stanza della Segnatura is a model in miniature. The city is the full-scale version.

— And this system is built on the golden ratio and the tetractys, — Andrea continued. — Nine points, three axes, one central point, ten levels of meaning.

— Albi found the codex and started mapping these axes, — Miriam took out a map of Rome. — The Villa Farnesina is one point. The Stanze are another. What else?

Andrea opened the manuscript photographs on his tablet.

— The Pantheon. Santa Maria del Popolo. Palazzo Vidoni-Caffarelli. Villa Madama. Sant'Eligio degli Orefici. The Cortile del Belvedere.

He began marking the points on the map.

One by one.

And when the last one was placed, they saw it.

The points formed a shape.

Not perfect. Not entirely symmetrical. But recognizable.

— The tetractys, — Miriam whispered. — The city laid out in the form of a tetractys.

— And the centre... — Andrea drew lines from the upper points to the lower ones. They all converged on one place.

On the map, at the very heart of historic Rome.

Piazza Navona.

— Tomorrow we go there, — Miriam said.

— But what are we looking for?

— I don't know, — she admitted honestly. — But Albi knew. And it cost him his life.

Andrea set down his tablet and looked her in the eyes.

— Miriam. You understand we could be next?

She nodded.

— I understand. But if we stop now, Albi died for nothing. And I can't live with that.

Silence.

Somewhere outside, a Swiss Guard vehicle drove past. An ordinary patrol. An ordinary day in the Vatican.

But for Miriam and Andrea, nothing was ordinary anymore.

They had entered a game whose rules Raphael had written five hundred years ago.

A game where any move could be the last.

— All right, — Andrea said. — Piazza Navona. Tomorrow morning.

— Tomorrow morning, — Miriam confirmed.

They raised their glasses of wine.

— To Simone Albi, — Miriam said quietly.

— To the truth, — Andrea added.

The glasses touched with a soft chime.

And in the folder on the table between them lay a map of Rome, marked all over with lines and points.

A map of Raphael's code.

A map that would either lead them to the answer.

Or to death.

CHAPTER 5 — Nine Steps

*Rome, Professor Albi's apartment,
Prati district, 16:30*

The widow of Professor Albi opened the door on the third ring.

Claudia Albi was a woman who had aged a decade overnight. Fifty-six years old, gray hair gathered into a careless knot, eyes red from crying. She stood in the doorway in a black dress, holding onto the frame as though without that support she might fall.

— Signora Albi, — Miriam began gently. — We're friends of your husband's. Researchers. We're so sorry...

— Come in, — Claudia cut her off quietly. — Simone spoke of you. Dr. Klein, from Zurich, isn't it?

— Yes.

— He was waiting for you. These last two weeks, all he said was, "Miriam has to see this. Only she will understand." — The woman's voice caught. — Now it's too late.

She led them inside.

The apartment was ordinary enough for a professor — bookshelves rising to the ceiling, old furniture, windows looking out toward the distant dome of St. Peter's. But everywhere lay the disorder of recent grief: unwashed dishes, newspapers scattered with headlines about the murder, boxes of Simone's belongings that Claudia had evidently begun, then abandoned, sorting through.

— The police already came, — she said, sinking into a chair. — Took his computer, his phone, his documents. Said they were investigating. But I know... — she twisted a handkerchief in her hands. — I know they won't find anything. Because they're not looking in the right place.

— Signora, — Andrea said carefully. — Your husband was working on something important. We're trying to understand exactly what. It might help find...

— The killer? — Claudia gave a bitter laugh. — You think that will help? Will it bring Simone back to me?

Miriam sat down beside her.

— No. But it will give meaning to his work. He found something extraordinary. And we want the world to know about it. So his discovery doesn't die with him.

Claudia looked at her for a long moment. Then slowly nodded.

— Follow me.

She rose and led them down the hallway to the door of Simone's study.

The room was small, but every inch of it was in use. The walls were covered in maps, diagrams, photographs of frescoes. The desk was buried under books, drawings, printouts. A corkboard was covered edge to edge with scraps of paper linked together by red thread.

The typical study of an obsessed researcher.

— The police took the official documents, — Claudia said. — But Simone's personal notes... his journals... they didn't touch those. Said they weren't relevant to the investigation. — She opened a desk drawer and took out a thick leather-bound notebook. — Here. Six months of his work. He wrote in it every day.

Miriam took the notebook with trembling hands.

— Thank you.

— Find the truth, Dr. Klein, — Claudia asked quietly. — Simone gave his whole life to this. Don't let it be for nothing.

She left, closing the door behind her.

Miriam and Andrea were alone.

Slowly, almost reverently, Miriam opened the diary.

The first page — dated March 15, six months earlier.

The entry described how Albi had found, that day, a mention of the *Codex Perspectivae* in Cardinal Bibbiena's correspondence — a letter in which the cardinal recalled Raphael showing him drawings of a city that spoke the language of geometry, something Bibbiena admitted he hadn't understood at the time but now believed had been not art but a machine of revelation. Albi wrote that those two words, "machine of revelation," would not leave him alone.

Miriam turned the pages. The entries grew more and more feverish, the handwriting less and less legible.

April 20: Albi had found a connection between *The Triumph of Galatea* and *The School of Athens* — an axis of perspective running straight through the Tiber, not metaphorically but literally, as if Raphael had seen the whole city as his canvas.

May 3: He had plotted nine points on a map, and they formed a tetractys — but it was more than geometry, he wrote; each point was a level, nine layers of meaning stacked on one another like coats of paint on a fresco.

Andrea looked over Miriam's shoulder.

— Nine layers of meaning?

Miriam flipped ahead quickly, searching for an explanation.

And she found it. An entry from June 17 — a week before Albi's death:

"RAPHAEL'S NINE STEPS"

Below it — a diagram. Nine horizontal lines, like the rungs of a ladder. Beside each, a note:

1. GEOMETRIA — the geometric structure. Proportions, angles, the golden ratio.

2. TOPOGRAPHIA — topographic placement. The connection to real locations in the city.

3. PERSPECTIVA — perspective. Vanishing points, axes of sight.

4. NARRATIO — narrative. The fresco's story, the tale it tells on its surface.

5. ALLEGORIA — allegory. Hidden symbols, metaphors.

6. NUMEROLOGIA — numerology. Numerical codes, Pythagorean sequences.

7. ASTRONOMIA — astronomy. Correspondence with the movement of celestial bodies, solar axes.

8. HARMONIA — harmony. Musical proportions, acoustic resonances.

9. ANIMA URBIS — the soul of the city. The central point where all levels merge into a single revelation.

Miriam stopped breathing.

— This isn't just a code, — she whispered. — It's a system of interpretation. Raphael built nine ways of reading the same work. And only once you've climbed all nine steps do you understand the true message.

Andrea bent over the diagram.

— It's like... like alchemy. Nine stages of transforming matter. Or like mystical teachings — nine spheres of knowledge.

— But Raphael wasn't a mystic, — Miriam objected. — He was a rationalist. A student of Bramante and Vitruvius. This isn't magic. It's... — she paused, searching for the word. — It's an engineering of meaning.

She turned further. On the next page — a drawing. A plan of the Stanza della Segnatura, divided into nine zones, each corresponding to one level.

Albi had written that once he applied all nine levels to *The School of Athens*, the fresco stopped being merely an image of philosophers and became a MAP — that every figure marked not just a person but a point in the city: Plato standing for the Pantheon, Aristotle for Santa Maria del Popolo, Pythagoras for the Villa Farnesina, and so on, nine philosophers equalling nine points on a map of Rome.

— My God, — Andrea breathed. — He encoded a map inside the fresco. Hid it in plain sight. For five hundred years people looked at *The School of Athens* and never saw that it wasn't just a scene from antiquity. It was an instruction manual.

Miriam kept reading, her heart beating faster and faster.

Further down, Albi noted that the nine points were only the beginning — that three axes connected them (level 3, perspectiva), that there was a central point (level 9, anima urbis), and that there remained a tenth element he still didn't understand: what did the X in the code mean? Ten — was it a completion, or the beginning of something larger?

The last entry. June 22. The day before his death.

Albi wrote that he had found the central point — Piazza Navona, the Fountain of the Four Rivers — that at a certain hour of a certain day, sunlight fell at precisely the angle that joined all nine axes together, and that he planned to go there the next day with instruments to take exact measurements; if he was right, he wrote, if he was truly right, it would change everything they thought they knew about the Renaissance, about Raphael, about the very nature of art.

Miriam closed the diary.

Silence.

Outside the window, Rome went on with its evening life. Somewhere bells rang. Somewhere people laughed. Somewhere lights came on in windows.

But in this room, time had stopped.

— He was one step from the answer, — Andrea said quietly. — One step. And they killed him.

— Not just killed him, — Miriam opened the diary to the last page again. — Killed him exactly when he was about to take his final measurement. Someone knew. Someone was watching him.

— But who?

Miriam looked at the wall, at the map of Rome marked all over with Albi's notes. Nine points. Three axes. One centre.

Piazza Navona.

— Tomorrow we go there, — she said. — With instruments. At the same hour Albi had planned to go. And we finish his work.

— That's dangerous.

— I know.

— We could be killed.

— I know, — Miriam repeated, meeting his eyes. — But if we don't go, Albi died for nothing. And I won't let that happen.

Andrea was silent for a few seconds, then nodded.

— All right. But we take out insurance first.

— What kind?

— I know a journalist. An old friend. Works at *Repubblica*. If we send him a copy of the diary and our findings, set to publish automatically if something happens to us, killing us stops making sense. The information gets out either way.

Miriam thought it over, then nodded.

— Smart. Do it tonight.

Andrea took out his phone and began photographing the diary's pages.

Miriam returned to the map on the wall. She ran a finger along the lines connecting the points.

Nine steps.

Nine levels of understanding.

Nine ways of seeing the invisible.

Raphael hadn't merely created art. He had created a *path*. A ladder leading from a surface glance to a deep understanding. From form to meaning. From the visible to the hidden.

And on the ninth step, at the very centre of that path, lay the truth.

Anima Urbis.

The soul of the city.

The thing Albi had been trying to find.

The thing he had paid for with his life.

The thing they now had to find themselves.

Trattoria near Piazza Navona, 20:00

They sat at a table outside, a map of Rome, Albi's diary, and two laptops spread in front of them.

Andrea was finishing sending the files to his journalist contact. Miriam studied the notes, trying to work out exactly what measurements Albi had planned to take.

— He wrote about sunlight, — she said. — About how, at a certain time of day, the light falls at just the right angle. What time?

Andrea pulled up an astronomical calculator on his phone.

— June 23rd. The summer solstice. The longest day of the year. The sun reaches its maximum height at 13:07. At that exact moment, the shadow of the obelisk on the Fountain of the Four Rivers should point toward...

He trailed off, running the calculation.

— Toward what? — Miriam asked impatiently.

— The Church of Sant'Agnese in Agone. It stands right on the west side of the piazza. The facade is Borromini's work.

— Borromini worked a century after Raphael.

— Yes, but the church was built on the site of an ancient Roman stadium. Domitian's arena. And that existed in Raphael's time. — Andrea enlarged the image on his screen. — Look. If you overlay the plan of the old arena onto the modern piazza...

Miriam leaned in closer.

The plan of the Roman stadium matched the outline of Piazza Navona perfectly. The oval shape had survived across two millennia.

— Raphael used ancient geometry, — she whispered. — The Romans built the arena according to specific proportions. And he built those proportions into his system.

— Not just built them in, — Andrea overlaid the lines of the axes from Albi's diary onto the plan. — He made the arena the central node. All nine points of his code converge here. At the centre of the oval. Where the fountain stands today.

Miriam looked over her shoulder. At the end of the street, past the buildings, part of Piazza Navona was visible. Lights, tourists, street artists.

An ordinary place. One of the most beautiful piazzas in Rome.

But now she knew that beneath that beauty something greater lay hidden.

— Tomorrow at 13:07, — she said. — We need to be there. With precise instruments. With cameras. And we need to record everything.

— I'll bring the theodolite and a GPS receiver from the university, — Andrea nodded. — We'll measure the angles down to the second.

— And I'll prepare a diagram of all nine levels, — Miriam added. — We'll check each one — from geometry to astronomy.

They fell silent, finishing their wine.

Around them, Roman life bustled on. Waiters carried out pizzas. Lovers kissed by the fountains. Scooters honked in the traffic.

No one knew that tomorrow, in Piazza Navona, a secret hidden for five hundred years would be uncovered.

A secret that had already cost one man his life.

And might cost two more.

— Miriam, — Andrea said quietly. — Why are you doing this?

She looked at him.

— What do you mean?

— You could have flown back to Zurich. Handed everything to the police. Forgotten about it. But you stayed. Why?

Miriam thought for a moment. She looked at the map, at the lines connecting the points.

— Because I've spent my whole life studying art, — she said slowly. — Analyzing it, cataloguing it, writing papers about it. But somewhere deep down I always felt I was missing something important. That the great masters left us more than we could see. And now I've found the proof. Raphael really did create something extraordinary. And I want to understand it. All the way to the end. Even if it's dangerous.

Andrea nodded.

— So do I. Which is why we make a good team.

He reached his hand across the table.

Miriam shook it.

— A good team, — she repeated.

And at that moment, without either of them realizing it, they crossed the point of no return.

Tomorrow, at 13:07, in Piazza Navona, beneath the summer sun of Rome, they would climb the ninth step.

And learn what the soul of the Eternal City had been hiding.

CHAPTER 6 — The Pantatio of Rome

Biblioteca Angelica, Piazza Sant'Agostino

09:00, the next morning

Four hours until solar zenith.

Miriam hadn't slept all night. She'd reread Albi's diary, taken notes, cross-checked the data. And she'd come across a strange word the professor had mentioned only in passing, without ever decoding it:

"Check the connection to the ancient pantatio. Vitruvius mentions it in Book VII"

Pantatio.

Miriam searched for the word online — nothing. In Latin dictionaries — nothing. In modern architectural terminology — nothing either.

Only a single mention, in an old seventeenth-century Italian treatise, describing it as a lost art of projecting images onto a landscape.

A lost art.

At seven in the morning she called Andrea.

— Do you know what a pantatio is?

— No. But I know who might.

An hour later they stood in the Biblioteca Angelica — the oldest public library in Rome, founded in 1604.

They were met by the curator of the rare books department, Professor Marco Santini — a seventy-year-old man with a shock of snow-white hair and eyes that had seen far too many ancient texts.

— Pantatio, — he repeated, once he'd heard the question. — A rare word. Very rare. — He led them deeper into the library, between shelves rising toward a painted ceiling. — The term appears in only a handful of authors. Vitruvius mentions it in passing. Alberti quotes it without explaining it. And only one man ever described it in detail.

— Who? — Miriam asked.

— Giulio Romano. Raphael's pupil.

Miriam and Andrea exchanged a glance.

Santini stopped at a locked cabinet, opened it with an old key, and took out a slim book in a worn leather binding.

— *Liber de Proiectione Urbana*, 1524. A book on urban projection. Giulio Romano wrote it four years after Raphael's death. It isn't an architectural treatise. It's... — he paused, choosing his words. — It's a manual for reading the city as a living picture.

He set the book on a velvet cushion beneath a lamp.

Miriam put on gloves and carefully opened it.

A title page. Then a dedication, addressed to Raphael as the master who had made the city itself into a living picture.

She turned the page.

Latin text, small, dense. Miriam read slowly, translating aloud as she went — describing how the ancients had known an art the Greeks called *pantatio*, the projection of all things onto a single plane, distinct from cartography (where buildings are mere points) and from perspective (where the eye looks from one fixed place); pantatio, the text explained, was a way of seeing the city as a single, unified image, in which every building functioned as an element of a composition and the distances between them formed a rhythm, like music or poetry.

Andrea leaned over the book.

— So a pantatio is a method for turning three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional picture?

— Not quite, — Miriam kept reading. The next passage explained that the viewer did not stand outside the image but *inside* it — moving through the city as it unfurled around him like a scroll, each turn of a street revealing a new fragment of the composition, each piazza opening a new chapter of the story.

— My God, — Andrea whispered. — This is cinema. Raphael invented the cinema of architecture five hundred years before the invention of film.

Miriam turned the page. There — a diagram.

A plan of Rome. But a strange one. The buildings weren't shown as volumes but as *flat shapes* laid over the map, as if someone had taken a fresco, cut it into pieces, and scattered them across the city.

— Look, — Miriam pointed to the caption beneath the diagram. It explained that a pantatio required three elements: the *prospectus* — the point from which the gaze begins; the *transitus* — the path along which the viewer moves; and the *epiphania* — the place where the complete picture is finally revealed.

— Beginning, journey, revelation, — Andrea translated. — The classic structure of a story.

Miriam flipped ahead quickly. Page after page — descriptions of routes through Rome, each one engineered to produce a particular visual effect.

One route, from the Pantheon to the Villa Farnesina, was described as showing the viewer a sequence of domes, each smaller than the last, creating the illusion of a vanishing distance stretching toward infinity.

Another, from the Capitoline Hill to St. Peter's Basilica, used the axes of the streets to form a perspective that pulled the eye toward the central dome, exactly as a vanishing point pulls the eye across a fresco.

— Raphael wasn't designing buildings, — Miriam said slowly. — He was designing *experience*. Visual journeys. Every route is like reading a fresco, except instead of the eye moving across a painted surface, it's the body moving through the city.

She reached the middle of the book. And stopped.

A chapter heading:

“DE PANTATIO MAGNA — On the Great Pantatio”

Below it, the text described how Raphael had created the greatest pantatio of all — taking the whole of Rome and turning it into a single picture that could only be read by walking a specific path; a path with nine stations, corresponding to the nine muses, and that whoever walked all nine would reach the centre — the place where the city revealed its soul.

Miriam stopped breathing.

Nine stations.

Albi's nine levels.

They were the same thing.

— Andrea, — she whispered. — The nine points on the map aren't just geometry. They're a route. A pantatio. A visual journey from the beginning to the centre.

Andrea took out his tablet and opened the map with the marked points.

— If it's a route... we need the sequence. What order do you walk the points in?

Miriam went back to the diagram in Giulio Romano's book.

There, barely visible, Roman numerals stood beside each building on the plan.

I — The Pantheon

II — Santa Maria del Popolo

- III — Villa Farnesina
- IV — The Vatican Stanze
- V — Palazzo Vidoni-Caffarelli
- VI — Villa Madama
- VII — Cortile del Belvedere
- VIII — Sant'Eligio degli Orefici
- IX — Piazza Navona

— There it is, — Miriam breathed. — The sequence. The nine stations of Raphael's great pantatio.

Andrea quickly marked the numbers on his own map.

— And if we connect the points in this order...

He drew the lines.

The result wasn't a straight path. It was a *spiral*.

The route began at the Pantheon in the east, moved clockwise, gradually narrowing, coiling in toward the centre.

Toward Piazza Navona.

— A spiral, — Andrea whispered. — Like a nautilus shell. Like a galaxy. A symbol of eternal movement toward a centre.

Miriam turned back to the book. She read the chapter's final paragraph, which explained that whoever completed the whole path had to do so at a specific hour — when the sun stood at its zenith, on the day of the summer solstice — for then the shadows of the buildings would form one last axis, the axis of time, and at the centre of the piazza, where space and time, architecture and light, past and present all met, the thing his master had called ANIMA URBIS would be revealed: not a place, not an object, but a moment of revelation in which the viewer understood that the city was not stone, but a living thought given form.

Silence.

In the library, only the ticking of an old wall clock could be heard.

Professor Santini, standing off to one side, spoke quietly:

— Do you understand what you're looking for?

— Yes, — Miriam answered, closing the book. — We're looking for a way to see Rome through Raphael's eyes. To walk his path. And at the end of that path — to understand what he wanted to say, five hundred years ago.

— And you think that's possible?

Miriam checked the time. 10:15.

Three hours until zenith.

— We'll know in three hours.

**The streets of Rome,
following the route, 10:30 — 12:45**

They didn't have time to walk all nine stations in person. But Andrea proposed another solution.

— I have a camera with GPS. We'll mark the exact coordinates of each station, take photographs from the specific angles. Then we'll assemble a virtual walkthrough afterward.

— But why? — Miriam asked. — If the main event happens at the centre, in Piazza Navona?

— Because a pantatio is a *sequence*, — Andrea explained. — Each station prepares the viewer for the next. The visual information accumulates. Only once you've passed through all eight are you ready for the ninth. For the revelation.

Miriam nodded.

— Then quickly. We have two hours.

They started at the Pantheon — Station I.

Andrea set up the camera at the exact coordinates noted in Albi's diary: the northeast corner of the portico, 41.8986°N, 12.4768°E.

From there, the dome was visible. A perfect hemisphere, the eye of the oculus at its centre.

— Look, — Andrea aimed the camera. — Standing here, the dome of the Pantheon visually aligns with the dome of St. Peter's in the distance. They overlap. Like a double exposure in a photograph.

Miriam looked. He was right. Two domes, separated by two kilometres, became one from this single point.

— The first layer of the pantatio, — she whispered. — Superimposition. Raphael showing us: ancient Rome and Christian Rome are one and the same.

Station II — Santa Maria del Popolo.

The Piazza del Popolo, the northern gate of the city. An obelisk at its centre.

Andrea measured the angle: from the obelisk to the church, exactly forty-five degrees. From the church to the Via del Corso, forty-five degrees as well.

— A geometry of perfection, — he said. — Raphael designed this piazza. Built a perfect triangle.

Station III — the Villa Farnesina.

They had already been here. They knew the axis. But now, seen within the context of the pantatio, Miriam saw more.

— *The Triumph of Galatea*, — she said. — Galatea moves in a circle. But the circle isn't closed. It's open toward the Vatican. Like an invitation. "Follow further."

Stations IV, V, VI, VII, VIII.

One after another. Photographs. Measurements. Angles. Lines.

With each station the spiral drew tighter. The visual elements accumulated. Domes. Obelisks. Arches. Columns.

All of them pointing. Directing. Leading.

Toward the centre.

Toward the ninth station.

At 12:30 they stood at the edge of Piazza Navona.

Crowds of tourists. Street artists. Souvenir sellers. Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers at the centre of the oval piazza, its obelisk rising into the sky.

— Fifteen minutes to zenith, — Andrea said, checking his watch.

Miriam took Albi's theodolite from her backpack.

— We set up at the centre. Exact coordinates: 41.8992°N, 12.4731°E.

They pushed through the crowd toward the fountain.

Tourists photographed the sculptures. Children threw coins into the water. No one paid any attention to two researchers with surveying equipment.

Andrea mounted the theodolite on its tripod. Miriam took out a compass, a GPS receiver, a solar calculator.

12:45.

Twenty-two minutes until the moment of truth.

The sun climbed toward its zenith, the shadows slowly shortening.

— What are we looking for? — Andrea asked quietly.

— I don't know, — Miriam admitted honestly. — Albi wrote about the obelisk's shadow. About a precise axis. About a revelation. But exactly what...

She trailed off, looking up.

The Obelisk of the Four Rivers — an Egyptian monolith brought to Rome by the emperor Domitian. Twenty meters tall. A dove at its summit, the symbol of Pope Innocent X.

But the obelisk had been erected by Bernini in 1651.

A hundred and thirty years after Raphael's death.

— Wait, — Andrea frowned. — Raphael died in 1520. This fountain didn't exist yet. Neither did an obelisk on this spot.

— But the place did, — Miriam took out an old map of Rome from Albi's diary. — Look. 1518. A plan of the city. Here, where Piazza Navona now stands — the ruins of Domitian's stadium. And at the centre of the stadium...

She enlarged the image.

There, a barely visible point.

A caption: "*Fons Antiquus — the ancient spring.*"

— A spring, — Andrea whispered. — There was a water source here. And Raphael knew about it. He built his pantatio around an ancient centre. Not around Bernini's fountain. Around what had been here long before.

Miriam looked at the fountain with new eyes.

Bernini hadn't invented an arbitrary composition. He had *reconstructed* an ancient spring. Followed a plan laid down centuries earlier.

Raphael's plan.

12:55.

Twelve minutes.

The obelisk's shadow crept slowly across the marble of the piazza.

Miriam watched. Waited.

And suddenly understood.

— Andrea. The axis isn't from the obelisk. The axis runs *toward* the obelisk. From all nine points.

She quickly opened her tablet, overlaying the pantatio map onto a photograph of the piazza.

Nine lines. From nine stations. All of them converging — not simply on the piazza.

They converged on *one specific spot* within it.

The exact place where the obelisk's shadow, at the moment of zenith...

13:07.

The sun reached its highest point.

The obelisk's shadow shrank to its minimum.

Almost vanished.

But not quite.

A thin line of shadow, like a compass needle, pointed due south.

Toward the Church of Sant'Agnese in Agone, on the piazza's southern side.

Miriam and Andrea turned at the same moment.

The church's facade, built by Borromini. Baroque, ornate, majestic.

But beneath it...

— Ancient ruins, — Miriam whispered. — The church is built on the remains of the stadium. On the site of the gladiators' holding chamber.

She took out binoculars and looked at the facade.

And saw it.

There, above the central entrance, a barely noticeable detail in the ornamentation.

A cartouche.

A heraldic shield.

On it — a symbol.

The Tetractys.

Ten points, arranged in a triangle.

Raphael's coat of arms.

CHAPTER 7 — The Laocoön Quadrant

Piazza Navona 13:12

— This can't be a coincidence, — Miriam kept her binoculars trained on the church facade.
— The tetractys on the coat of arms. Exactly at the point the obelisk's shadow points to.

Andrea was already photographing it on his phone at maximum zoom.

— Borromini built the church in 1652. But he could have known about Raphael's system. He could have worked the symbol in deliberately.

— Or, — Miriam lowered the binoculars, — that emblem was there before. On an earlier building. And Borromini simply reproduced it.

She checked the time. 13:13. The moment of zenith had passed. The obelisk's shadow had already begun to lengthen, to shift.

— We need to get inside the church, — Andrea said. — Check whether there are more traces of Raphael's code in there.

Miriam nodded, but something was bothering her.

— Albi was killed before he ever saw this. He didn't know about the emblem on the church. So he was looking for something else. Something that was meant to be revealed at the moment of zenith.

— Maybe inside the church?

— Or... — Miriam looked at the map on her phone again. — Andrea, look. The nine points of the pantatio. We followed them in a spiral to the centre. But Albi's code is IX — III — I—X. Nine, three, one, ten. What if that isn't only a sequence? What if it's pointing to a *different* set of nine points?

Andrea frowned.

— Different ones? Where?

Miriam quickly scrolled through Albi's diary on her phone.

— He wrote about level VII — astronomia. Astronomical correspondences. Raphael used not only the geometry of the city, but the movement of the heavens too.

— You're thinking of sundials?

— Not only that. — Miriam stopped on one of the entries. — Here. "Check the Cortile del Belvedere. The Laocoön. The shadows shift across a quadrant. Possible link to the constellations."

— The Cortile del Belvedere, — Andrea repeated. — The Belvedere Courtyard, in the Vatican. That's where the Laocoön group is kept.

— One of our nine points, — Miriam looked at him. — Station VII of our pantatio. We never went there in person. We only marked it on the map.

— But it's already past two. The Vatican Museums are open until six.

— Then we still have time, — Miriam began gathering the equipment. — We need to get there. Today. While the sun is still high.

Andrea called his contact in the Vatican administration. A short conversation. A nod.

— They'll expect us in half an hour. Service entrance. But we only get an hour before they close for evening mass preparations.

— That's enough, — Miriam said.

They caught a taxi and raced across the Tiber, toward the walls of the Vatican.

Vatican, Cortile del Belvedere 14:00

The Belvedere Courtyard was empty.

The tourists had been cleared out "for technical maintenance." Guards remained at the exits but didn't interfere.

Miriam and Andrea stood at the centre of the octagonal courtyard, ringed by Renaissance arcades.

And before them, in a niche beneath a canopy, stood one of the greatest sculptures of antiquity.

The Laocoön Group.

The Trojan priest and his two sons, strangled by serpents for warning the Trojans about the wooden horse. Marble, first century AD. Discovered in 1506 on the Esquiline Hill.

And it was Bramante, Raphael's friend and fellow architect, who had designed this courtyard specifically to house the sculpture.

— 1506, — Andrea whispered, looking at the statue. — Fourteen years before Raphael's death. He would have seen this sculpture hundreds of times. Studied it. Drawn it.

Miriam walked around the sculpture, watching the interplay of light and shadow.

The midday sun, filtering through the octagonal opening in the canopy's roof, struck the marble at a sharp angle. The shadows of the figures stretched across the floor, forming a complex pattern.

— Albi wrote about a quadrant, — she said. — The shadows sweep in a circle. What does that mean?

Andrea took out a compass and a solar calculator.

— A quadrant is a quarter of a circle. An ancient astronomical instrument for measuring the sun's height. But how does that connect to the Laocoön?

Miriam crouched down, studying the shadows on the floor.

Three figures — the father and his two sons. Three bodies entwined with serpents. Three shadows cast on the marble.

— Three shadows, — she whispered. — Three axes. Just like the III in Albi's code.

Andrea quickly took photographs from several angles, then opened an app for modeling the sun's path.

— If I enter this location's coordinates and calculate the sun's movement over the course of the day...

An animation appeared on the screen. The sun moved across the sky, and the shadows of the Laocoön group swept around like the hands of some enormous clock.

At six in the morning, the shadows pointed east. By nine, southeast. At noon, they shrank to a minimum, nearly vertical. By three in the afternoon, southwest. By six in the evening, west.

— A sundial, — Andrea breathed. — Bramante turned the sculpture into a sundial.

— But not just a clock, — Miriam pointed at the screen. — Look how the shadows move. Three shadows from three figures. They aren't parallel. They diverge at different angles.

Andrea zoomed in on the image.

She was right. The shadows cast by Laocoön and his two sons didn't fall the same way. The central figure of the father cast his shadow straight ahead. But the sons, standing on either side, cast shadows at angles — roughly thirty degrees to the left and right of the central axis.

— A triskelion, — Andrea whispered. — A three-branched spiral star. An ancient symbol of rotation, of the passage of time.

Miriam calculated quickly in her head.

— If each shadow is a ray, and they diverge at a thirty-degree angle... over the course of a day, as the sun completes its arc, those three shadows would trace out...

— A hundred-and-eighty-degree sector, — Andrea finished. — Half a circle. A quadrant within a quadrant.

He opened the map on his tablet and overlaid the shadow-movement schema.

Then went still.

— Miriam. Look at this.

She came closer.

On the screen — a plan of the Vatican with the Cortile del Belvedere at its centre. Andrea had overlaid the trajectories of the Laocoön's three shadows onto the map.

The morning shadow pointed precisely at the Stanza della Segnatura — *The School of Athens*.

The midday shadow pointed at the dome of St. Peter's Basilica.

The evening shadow pointed at the Sistine Chapel.

— Three axes, — Miriam whispered. — The three principal points of the Vatican. Joined by the shadows of an ancient sculpture.

— But that's not all, — Andrea zoomed further. — Look what happens on certain days of the year.

He switched the calculator to the date of the spring equinox — March 21st.

The shadow trajectories changed.

At the moment of sunrise, the first shadow pointed exactly east. At the moment of zenith, the second shadow vanished entirely, the sun directly overhead. At the moment of sunset, the third shadow pointed exactly west.

Three moments. Three axes. East — zenith — west.

— This isn't just a sundial, — Miriam said. — It's an astronomical instrument. Laocoön and his sons are a model of the sun's movement. The father — the centre, the zenith. The sons — sunrise and sunset.

Andrea switched the calculator to the date of the summer solstice — June 21st.

And suddenly everything changed.

On the screen, at the moment of zenith, at 13:07, the three shadows of the Laocoön group formed a perfect shape on the courtyard floor.

The Tetractys.

Ten points.

Not drawn. Not carved.

Made of shadow.

— My God, — Andrea breathed. — Bramante and Raphael designed this together. They placed the sculpture at the exact spot, at the exact angle, so that on one single day of the year, at one single moment, the shadows would form a tetractys.

Miriam stared at the screen, hardly believing her own eyes.

— An astronomical tetractys. Level VII — astronomia. Albi knew. He worked this out.

She quickly opened the professor's diary on her phone and found the relevant entry.

Albi had written that on June 21st, the summer solstice, at 13:07, the three shadows of the Laocoön formed a tetractys on the floor of the Cortile del Belvedere — and that the ten points of that shadow-tetractys matched the ten points in *The School of Athens* exactly, which he insisted could not be coincidence: Raphael had synchronized the fresco, the sculpture, and the movement of the sun — three systems in one, painting, architecture, and astronomy. But why, he had asked — what was revealed when all three systems aligned?

The last question had gone unanswered.

Albi never got the chance to find out.

Miriam looked at Andrea.

— Today is June 24th. The solstice was three days ago.

— But the effect should still be visible, — Andrea checked the calculations. — The sun is nearly at the same point. The deviation is minimal. If we come back here tomorrow at 13:07...

— We'll see the astronomical tetractys, — Miriam finished.

They fell silent, looking at the marble group of the Laocoön.

The ancient priest, frozen in marble for two thousand years, screaming a silent scream. The serpents crushing him and his sons. A tragedy captured forever.

But to Raphael, this had never been merely a sculpture.

It had been an instrument.

Part of a vast machine of meaning, stretched across space and time.

— If the Laocoön's shadows form a tetractys, — Miriam said slowly, — and that tetractys matches the one in *The School of Athens*... then there's a connection between them. Geometric. Visual.

— An axis, — Andrea nodded. — Another axis in Raphael's code.

He opened the 3D model of the Vatican he'd built earlier.

Marked the Cortile del Belvedere. Marked the Stanza della Segnatura. Drew a line.

Distance: one hundred and eighty meters. Direction: due south.

— A direct line of sight, — Andrea whispered. — If it weren't for the walls, standing here, in the Laocoön's courtyard, you could look straight through to *The School of Athens*.

— Raphael knew that, — Miriam said. — He built a visual corridor. Invisible, but real. And at the moment of the solstice, when the shadows form a tetractys here — the same thing happens on the fresco.

— What exactly?

Miriam recalled her observations in the Stanza.

— When we were there, I noticed something: at a certain time, sunlight through the windows creates a pattern on the fresco. We assumed it was chance. But if it's synchronized with the Laocoön...

Andrea quickly dialed his museum contact.

— Marco? We need to get back into the Stanza della Segnatura. It's urgent. Yes, today. No, it can't wait.

A brief pause.

— Good. Twenty minutes.

He hung up.

— Let's go. We have half an hour before closing.

They left the courtyard, but Miriam turned back at the threshold.

Laocoön watched her with empty marble eyes. The priest who had warned the city of danger. And been punished by the gods for speaking the truth.

Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes.

Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.

But Raphael had inverted that meaning.

He hadn't turned Laocoön into a warning.

He had turned him into a key.

A key unlocking the next level of the code.

Stanza della Segnatura 14:35

The hall was empty. Raphael's frescoes glowed in the afternoon light.

Miriam and Andrea stood at the centre, at the spot where, three days earlier, they had calculated the vanishing point of all the axes.

— At 13:07, at the moment of zenith, — Miriam said, — the sunlight should create a pattern. We were here at noon, but not on the day of the solstice.

Andrea opened his lighting-simulation software and entered the parameters: June 21st, 13:07, the coordinates of the Stanza.

A 3D model of the hall appeared on screen, tracing the path of the sunlight.

And they saw it.

At the moment of zenith, the sun entered through three windows of the hall. Three beams of light struck the floor at specific angles.

And formed a shape on the marble.

The Tetractys.

Identical to the one made by the Laocoön's shadows in the Cortile del Belvedere.

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