THE AMALFI SECRET

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PREFACE

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Gabe sat in his favorite chair. The weight of two decades of memories pressed heavily on his mind. He'd just watched the second inauguration of Donald Trump, a moment that encapsulated the tumultuous journey of the past twenty years. The backdrop for the inauguration was a wall of former presidents stretching from Bill Clinton to the present. Each had taken their turn standing guard over history. And each represented the peaceful transition of power.

At center stage stood Trump. His visage was bold and confident, no challenge too big, no accomplishment out of reach. He proclaimed the golden age of America, greater than ever before. He said America would be a nation like no other, full of compassion, courage, and exceptionalism. He promised American power would stop all wars and bring a new spirit of unity to a world that was angry, violent, and totally unpredictable. His range of assurances was far-reaching.

As Carrie Underwood belted out a flawless acapella version of "America the Beautiful," Gabe grappled with a whirlwind of thoughts. He couldn't help but draw parallels between Trump's grandiose claims and the messianic visions of old. Trump promised everything. He laid out a bold vision, *but what does it mean*? Gabe wondered.

Reverend Franklin Graham went so far as to pray, "Father, when Donald Trump's enemies thought he was down and out, you and you alone saved his life and raised him up with strength and power by your mighty hand." The tone implied a mandate not only from the American people but also from Almighty God himself.

Gabe's gaze shifted to a portrait hanging next to the TV. It was Anna, her stunning beauty undiminished by the passage of time. A deep foreboding

tore at his heart. She had opened his eyes to so many dark secrets, secrets that had shaped their work and lives. He missed everything about her.

Gabe pondered the future. Would America become the shining beacon of hope that Donald Trump promised? The past twenty years had been a rollercoaster; the future remained uncertain. Yet, amidst it all, Gabe found solace in the memory of Anna. The work they'd undertaken together was a bittersweet comfort. However, she'd often said, even in the darkest of times, there was always light and hope. He flicked off the TV, picked up his backpack, and walked out the door.

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POST-SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

The lone fisherman realized the time was approaching. It was nearly eleven o'clock. Pulling his woolen cap down against the chill of the autumn night, he chuckled as he mused about the interesting character who'd approached him at the docks that afternoon.

Who am I to ask questions? he thought. After all, he'd been pulling in only small catches lately. Seemed like an awfully simple, if mildly inconvenient, task for the amount of cash the stranger had offered.

As he maneuvered his small, wooden rig along the coastline, the lights of the Amalfi Hotel emerged from the blackness. He guided his boat into position and scanned his surroundings. No one else was fishing the waters below the hotel. He was alone.

When he cut the engine, he could see a party in progress on one of the balconies. It appeared to be in full swing with loud, raucous voices. He unfolded his fishing net and hoped they'd be too drunk to notice him.

He checked his watch again and surveyed the rest of the hotel. Many of the windows were already dark. A lone person was standing on the balcony one floor above the party. He was leaning on the banister and watching the boisterous activity below.

The fisherman continued to unfold his net as he awaited the exact moment. Suddenly, he heard a woman shout above the din.

"Look! Look out there!"

"Where?" the others questioned as they crowded the balcony rail.

"Right there!" said a redhead who pointed in his direction. "Can you see him? Check it out; he looks like something straight out of *Old Man and the Sea.* Wave and see if you can get his attention."

The fisherman tried to ignore them.

Three floors above the party, another man stood hidden in the shadows. He'd been there for the better part of an hour.

"Come to bed, John," his wife whispered sleepily. "We might as well try to get some rest despite the noise." Francesca Roslo was already in bed and felt very tired.

The man stepped in from the balcony. "They're just having a little fun, the excitement of a big trip and all. Just imagine if we were that young again. We certainly wouldn't be thinking about sleep right now." His soothing words masked his apprehension. He knew the time was close. He stepped back out on the balcony and ducked into the shadows to watch the activity below.

More partygoers had gathered along the rail to catch a glimpse of the fisherman untangling his nets. One of them, a skinny teenager, climbed up on the stone ledge and nearly lost his balance. The fisherman heard a collective gasp as an older gentleman pulled him back from the edge.

The fisherman acted as if he hadn't noticed and checked his watch again. It was time. He laid down his nets and picked up a flashlight. He pointed it up toward the hotel windows and flashed it not once, not twice, but three distinct times.

A cheer went up from the balcony. "He sees us!" the redhead shouted, followed by congratulatory backslaps all around.

The man in the shadows had also seen the three flashes. Concerned, John Roslo stepped back inside his hotel room. He walked to the bed and sat beside his wife, gently stroking her face.

"Fran, I know you're tired, but I'm not ready for bed. It's a beautiful night. I'm going to take a stroll down to the water."

"Please don't be out too late, dear," she pleaded. "It's been a long day, and we both need some sleep."

"You go ahead and sleep. I'll join you when I get back from my walk."

He bent down, whispered a few words in her ear, and kissed her on the cheek. Comforted, she rolled over and exhaled a deep sigh.

Roslo straightened himself and crossed the room to the bureau where he kept his attaché case. He quietly unlocked it and pulled out an old journal. He slipped the journal into the breast pocket of his jacket and relocked the case. He paused a moment and heard Francesca's breathing slow to a rhythmic pattern. She was already asleep. Everything was ready.

He tiptoed to the door, turned off the light, and stepped into the dimly lit corridor. A figure emerged from the shadows as he turned to lock the door. Before Roslo could react, the sting of a needle pierced the side of his neck. In an instant, the stranger vanished up the staircase.

Panicked, John Roslo grasped the door handle, re-entered his room, and stumbled into the bathroom. He closed the door behind him. As tremendous pressure squeezed his chest, a distinct numbness traveled through his body. He splashed water on his face, then doubled over as he felt his throat constrict.

Roslo grabbed his journal but was already losing his fine motor skills. The journal crashed to the floor. He realized what was happening and struggled to fight the leaden feeling that crept into his right arm.

I haven't much time, he thought as he gasped for breath. With great effort, he raised his hand to the mirror. As he groped for the hot water knob, the paralysis reached his heart. The last thing he saw was his own contorted face in the mirror.

In the bedroom, Francesca slept peacefully, lulled by the sounds of the sea. Hours later, she rolled over in the early morning chill and reached for the familiar warmth of the man she had loved for sixty years. But he wasn't there.

Two floors below, Gabe Roslo had finally entered deep sleep after tossing and turning for most of the night. The party on the balcony below had wound down, and the only sound was the pulse of the sea. A nearly full moon cast a glow on the wall and added to the serenity.

Gabe had arrived the previous evening at the invitation of his grandparents, John and Francesca Roslo. He hadn't seen them in over a year and looked forward to this reunion in Italy. As a Canadian climbing guide, Gabe also anticipated the challenging peaks Italy would provide. During the long twenty-two-hour journey from western Canada, warm memories of his youth had filtered through his mind. He loved his grandparents, especially his grandfather, who had been like a father to him.

Suddenly, the phone rang, tearing him from his sleep. Gabe squinted as he picked up his watch from the bedside table—5:45. *It must be a mistake,* he thought. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and reached for the phone.

"Gabe, it's me, Gram. Please come quickly. Something's wrong with your grandfather. I think he's…" Unable to finish her words, she broke into sobs.

"I'll be right there."

Gabe jumped from the bed. He grabbed an old T-shirt, stumbled into a pair of sweatpants, and ran for the stairs. In seconds, he was in their room,

where his grandmother was weeping in the open doorway. Just beyond, he saw his grandfather on the floor in the bathroom.

Gabe rushed in and crouched down beside him. He fought to maintain composure and instinctively felt for a pulse. It was futile. One touch of his grandfather's cold, stiff arm confirmed what his grandmother had been unable to say. His grandfather was gone and had probably been dead for most of the night.

He put his arms around his grandmother, gently supporting her as the tears flowed. Neither of them said a word. After a few moments, he led her to the nearest chair and helped her sit down. He crouched down beside her and placed a protective arm around her.

"Gram, I'm so very sorry," he repeated several times while she rested her head against his shoulder.

"We knew this would come someday," she whispered to him. "Just not right now."

A flurry of thoughts raced through Gabe's mind—what to do when someone dies in a foreign country, who to notify, what to do first. He knew he'd have to deal with all those details, but right now, the most important thing was helping his grandmother. Gabe stood and handed her some tissues.

He went back into the bathroom and could see that his grandfather had cut his head—from the fall, he guessed. Gabe grabbed a towel, gently lifted him off the floor, and moved him to the bed. He placed the towel under his head and pulled the blankets across his chest.

Gabe took a few steps back and looked at his grandmother. She smiled slightly and moved to the edge of the bed, where she sat down and lovingly caressed the head of the man she'd loved for so many years.

"Gram, I'm going to call the innkeeper," he said. He searched his mental register for the name of the man he'd briefly met when he arrived the night before.

"Lorenzo?" she asked, "Yes, please do. He and your grandfather were such good friends. He'll know what to do."

Gabe dialed the main desk but got no answer. The Amalfi Hotel was a family business, and it was still very early.

"I need to go upstairs and find him," Gabe said. "Why don't you come to my room and lie down for a few minutes?"

"Oh, my sweet Gabe," she replied, composing herself, "your grandfather and I have been together so long. I need some time with him. Go find Lorenzo, and I'll stay with my John."

Gabe hesitated and watched his grandmother. She was slight of stature and frail to look at, but he knew from experience that she had an inner strength that would get her through almost any trial.

That was the kind of love he'd wanted for Sarah and himself, a love that would last until death. *But that will never happen now,* he thought. He shook off the mental lapse, turned, and bounded up the stairs, three at a time.

The terrace café of the Amalfi Hotel was nearly the highest point of the building, surpassed only by the level above with the office and a three-car parking garage. The hotel was originally a residence built into a cliff that overlooked the Mediterranean on the outskirts of Amalfi. Gabe would have been drawn in by the breathtaking views any other time, but at the moment, he had only one goal: to find Lorenzo Bonelli.

He spotted Signore Bonelli behind the serving counter in the dining room. His back was to Gabe, and he was squeezing juice for the morning's breakfast.

"Excuse me, Signore Bonelli," Gabe called as he zigzagged through the tables.

Momentarily startled, Lorenzo turned around. "I'm sorry, we don't serve breakfast until 7:00," he began before he recognized Gabe, "but for John's grandson, I can have a cappuccino ready in two minutes."

Lorenzo Bonelli was smiling broadly, but then he noticed the look on Gabe's face. "What is it, young man? Is something wrong?" he asked.

"My grandfather—he passed away last night."

Gabe saw the puzzled look on Lorenzo's face and tried again. "He died."

Lorenzo gasped, closed his eyes, and whispered, "Gesù, Maria, Giuseppe, resto suo anima. Where is Francesca? Is she all right?" he asked as he hastily removed his apron and washed the juice from his hands.

"Yes, for the moment. She's with my grandfather now. She found him in the bathroom a few minutes ago, but I think he's been dead for a few hours."

"Let's go to him," Lorenzo said, already heading for the staircase.

Gabe was astonished at the speed by which Lorenzo descended the four flights of stairs. Despite his age, it was obvious that years of climbing the stairs of the Amalfi Hotel had kept him in excellent physical condition.

"I don't want you to worry, Gabriel," Lorenzo said as they reached the bottom of the staircase. "Your grandfather is…was…one of my closest friends, and Francesca is like family. You take care of her. I'll take care of the rest."

He pushed open the door. "Francesca, I'm here."

Gabe stood in the doorway and watched as the two embraced. His grandfather had only mentioned Lorenzo in passing, but he was obviously a

close family friend. Then Gabe was struck by a thought as he absorbed that bittersweet moment. *How could he love his grandfather so much yet know so little about him?* Gabe was grateful that his grandfather had invited him to Italy, but he was also sad. Now, there would be things he would *never* know about him.

Lorenzo and Francesca stood silently and looked at John's body on the bed. Gabe stepped back into the bathroom to be alone for a moment. He closed the door and fumbled for the light switch. In the darkness, he stumbled against something on the floor. When he found the switch, he flicked on the light to see what he'd kicked. It was an old book that had slid under the skirt of the vanity.

He picked it up and thumbed through it. The pages were damp and certain ones had been torn out. With yellowed pages and a cracked leather binding, he was almost certain it was an antique. The pages were filled with handwritten script. *Is this some type of journal or maybe a diary?* he thought.

He stepped back into the room. "Gram, I found this on the floor in the bathroom. Did you drop it?"

"May I see that?" Lorenzo asked, intercepting it before Gabe could hand it to his grandmother. "It looks very old. Perhaps it belonged to John."

"I don't know," Francesca replied. "It might have been John's, but I've never seen it before. He was always reading, you know. He probably had it in his attaché case, but I learned long ago not to ask what he was up to."

She smiled and thought back on all the years she'd kept her questions to herself in support of John and his work for the National Security Agency. They'd agreed long ago on a "don't ask, don't tell" policy as it related to his work—well, most of the time, anyway.

Eyeing the book, Lorenzo made an offer. "Perhaps you'd like me to keep John's things for you, Francesca. I have a safe upstairs in my private residence."

"That would be so kind of you, Lorenzo," she said.

"Don't worry, my dear. I'll take care of everything. I'll arrange to have John moved to a funeral home here in Amalfi until we can get him home to the States." He then turned to Gabe and added, "When you gather your grandfather's things, please bring them to me, and we'll lock them in the safe."

Lorenzo looked back at Francesca, "You and Gabe are welcome to stay as my guests as long as you wish. I'll provide anything you need. Is there anything more I can do right now?"

Francesca thought for a moment. "Yes, there is. Would you please call my cousins in Ravello?"

Lorenzo agreed, bowed slightly, and promised to return with coffee and breakfast after making the call. He handed the book back to Gabe and pulled the door shut. Gabe briefly looked at the book and then set it on a table in the corner.

Fifteen minutes later, Lorenzo reappeared with a tray and carried it to the balcony. He set it on the table and arranged two place settings.

"It's all set," he said. "I've called your cousins. They're on the way, and the funeral director should be here within the hour. There's something else I need to take care of, but here's your breakfast. Is there anything else you need right now, Francesca?"

"No, thank you so much, Lorenzo. We'll be fine for now."

Lorenzo bowed again and departed.

Gabe helped his grandmother to the balcony and into a chair, then sat beside her. He downed a cup of coffee while his grandmother picked at a pastry. There was a long silence. At last, he asked her who he needed to call stateside. She thought for a long moment.

While Gabe waited for a response, he saw Lorenzo return and go into the bathroom with a caddy of cleaning supplies.

"Please get in touch with Zachary Beckett," she finally said in response to Gabe's question. "He goes by Zach. He worked for your grandfather before John retired. He's still at the NSA and will want to know about John. The number for his private line is in our travel documents on the top shelf in the armoire. John always carried a list for emergencies, you know. I think you should contact Zach right away. Lorenzo should be able to help you connect the call."

Gabe stepped back into the room to retrieve the travel documents. He quickly found the list. "Always be prepared," his grandfather had told him many times. "It works in Boy Scouts, and it works in life."

Gabe took the phone numbers and went to the bathroom where Lorenzo was cleaning. The door was slightly ajar. He rapped once and pushed it open.

"Lorenzo, could you…?" he began before stopping cold. Lorenzo was frozen in place, standing in front of the sink and staring at the mirror.

What Gabe saw made his blood run cold. Scrawled in the steamed-up mirror were the letters

THBST
ISHR
SA

The end of the last letter trailed down the mirror as if the writer hadn't the strength to remove his hand before it fell.

"What the hell is that?" Gabe demanded in a harsh whisper. His words snapped Lorenzo from his trancelike state.

Lorenzo struggled for words and turned slowly to face him. "I… I don't know what it means. I bent down to clean the blood from the floor and left the hot water running. The mirror steamed up, and these letters appeared. I just saw them as you walked in. This could be serious."

"What do you mean by 'serious'?" Gabe questioned. He shut the bathroom door.

"These letters were written after your grandfather arrived," Lorenzo said.

"Anyone could have done that," Gabe countered. He ran his fingers through his hair as he tried to sort out what he'd just stumbled upon.

"No, Gabe. We clean the mirrors when we prepare the room for each new patron."

"It could have been missed by housekeeping," Gabe speculated.

"That's not possible," Lorenzo countered. "I cleaned this room myself."

Gabe felt a chill run down his spine for reasons he couldn't explain. Perhaps it had been the fear in Lorenzo's eyes. Gabe and Lorenzo stared at the ominous letters in front of them.

Suddenly, the spell was broken by Francesca. "Gabe, are you still here? Did Lorenzo tell you how to dial the call?" It was evident by the sound of her voice that she was speaking to him from the balcony.

"She wants me to call my grandfather's friend. He's stateside. She can't see this," Gabe told Lorenzo as he pointed to the mirror.

"Hurry then. My wife can help you connect the call." Lorenzo looked back at the mirror and added, "But there's someone who *does* need to see this."

"The police?" Gabe asked.

"No! Not the police! Not yet, anyway. Someone else, someone who might have an idea about what your grandfather meant," Lorenzo said, "if it even was your grandfather who wrote these letters."

Gabe cracked open the door. "I'm on my way," he called to his grandmother.

But it was too late. She was coming in from the balcony and headed toward the bathroom. "Is everything all right?" she asked, concerned.

"Fine, Gram."

Lorenzo panicked and reflexively reached for a towel to wipe the mirror.

"No!" Gabe exclaimed in a forced whisper. He grabbed Lorenzo's arm and flicked on the exhaust fan. "That'll take care of the mirror for now."

Lorenzo nodded. A look of relief washed over his face. He squeezed Gabe's shoulder firmly. "I'll sit with Francesca while you go to the office," Lorenzo said.

Lorenzo stepped out of the bathroom first, and Gabe followed, turned out the light, and closed the door. Thankfully, Francesca had stopped at John's bedside.

"Francesca, my dear," Lorenzo said. He extended his arms as he crossed the room toward her.

Gabe headed upstairs to the office. He felt shell-shocked and confused, and he focused on his breathing to calm himself. The adrenaline surge reminded him of what he'd felt during a climbing fall when he wondered, in that precarious instant, if his safety line would hold.

His mind raced. *What is the significance of those letters? And Lorenzo Bonelli's reaction to them? What does he mean by, "This could be serious?"* Gabe needed some answers. But first, he needed to call Zach Beckett. He decided not to mention what they'd seen on the mirror. Mr. Beckett might have been his grandfather's trusted confidant, but Gabe didn't know the man, nor did he know Gabe.

He took the last few stairs three at a time and steeled himself for the call. He entered the office, and Lorenzo's wife greeted him warmly.

"Mr. Roslo, I'm so sorry about your grandfather," she said with concern. "Can I get you anything to drink? You look a bit flushed."

"No, thank you. I'm fine, really."

She led him to a private phone and showed him how to dial the international call, then closed the door and left.

Gabe thought for a minute. He had one other call to make before dialing Beckett—to his mother. She would, no doubt, be asleep. The phone rang seven times and then rolled to the recorder. He hung up and tried her cell phone—the same result. He chose not to leave a message. He'd have to try again later.

Gabe looked at his grandfather's phone list. There was a notation by Zach Beckett's name that read *24-hour line* by the number. He looked at his watch: 6:40 a.m.—just before midnight in Washington, DC. *Late, but not too late, given the seriousness of my call*, Gabe thought.

A woman's voice answered, "Mr. Beckett's office."

Gabe was surprised to get a live voice that time of night. He identified himself as John Roslo's grandson and said he needed to speak to Mr. Beckett immediately. The call went through after a series of clicks and a short pause.

"Beckett here."

"Mr. Beckett, my name is Gabe Roslo, John Roslo's grandson."

"Yes, Gabe, I've heard much about you over the years. Please call me Zach. What can I do for you at this hour?"

Gabe hesitated momentarily. "I'm sorry for calling so late, but my grandfather died last night in Amalfi, Italy. My grandmother and I are here with him, and she asked me to call you."

"Died? I'm so sorry. Where is he now? Where are you—and what happened?" Beckett asked.

"He's still at the hotel," Gabe said. "My grandmother found him about an hour ago. The hotel owner has arranged to have his body moved to a funeral home here in Amalfi."

"This could take some time to sort out since he died overseas," Beckett said, "but I can certainly arrange to transport him back to the US. Your grandmother does want him buried in the States, I presume?"

"Yes, I'm sure she'll want him close to her."

"Good. I'll take care of everything. Where are you calling from?" Beckett asked.

"The Amalfi Hotel. It's a small hotel owned by a friend of my grandparents. The innkeeper has offered to let us stay here until the arrangements are made."

Beckett picked a piece of lint from his knee. "Has there been any discussion of an autopsy?"

Gabe looked surprised at his end of the line. "No, should there be?"

"It's standard operating procedure in a lot of places. If asked, tell the coroner you'd prefer to have the autopsy done stateside. Your grandfather had a career with the US government, and I'm sure they can make any arrangements necessary as a professional courtesy."

There was a short pause before Beckett continued. "Gabe, it might be best if I came to Amalfi. That way, I can provide the most assistance. In fact, tell your grandmother I'm on my way. I'll be there in twenty-four hours. Please give Francesca my condolences. I'm so very sorry about your grandfather. He was my mentor as well as my friend."

With that, Beckett hung up and looked at his watch. *I don't have much time*, he thought.

He immediately logged off his computer and stepped outside. He looked around to take in the hectic pace of the city. The Italian sun was shining brightly, and morning rush hour traffic had hit its peak on the streets of Rome.