

Chapter 1

The baby was brought to the Orphanage straight from the car accident that killed his mother. It was 3 a.m. Dead of night in the dead of the winter of the year 112.

Papa Louis winced as his bare feet met the floor tiles. Many times, over the years, the night bell had woken him like this. As Director of the Orphanage he could have left one of his staff to deal with the night arrivals, but that wasn't the way he liked to run things. At Orphanage 206 each new child was welcomed by Papa Louis himself. If welcome was the right word, given the circumstances.

Outside on the icy pavement a lone Officiate Guard, illuminated by the street lamp, was holding the child. Papa Louis took in the spots of blood on the infant's shawl but his glance was tugged immediately to meet the fierce gaze of large, almost-black eyes. The baby could be no more than two months old, but those eyes locked on to Papa Louis, took hold of him, thrusting out their unique challenge upon the world. I'm watching you, they seemed to say. So you'd better not foul up.

Papa Louis took the child and tucked him into the shelter of his arm. He could feel the force of the silent gaze as sure as if it were a beam of heat. The child was still in shock. The silence wouldn't last. Papa Louis knew this from long experience. He turned towards the office. The sooner they could get the official data done, the sooner this lanky, pale-faced Guard would leave and he could concentrate on the child.

'No living relatives,' said the Guard. 'We'll clear out her stuff in the morning.'

He meant that they'd go to the home of the dead woman and dispose of everything. And because there were no living relatives, all the goods would be sold and the proceeds given to the Island State, which would now raise the child. End of story.

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'She was killed outright,' he added.

'And the baby is unharmed?' said Papa Louis.

'He was lucky.'

Papa Louis's questioning glance brushed the Guard's eye just long enough to find the usual insolent glare in return. There were many questions he could have asked but there was no point. You never got answers by asking questions, not on this Island. If the Officiate wanted you to know about something, then you'd be told. Otherwise not.

Papa Louis set the baby down carefully in a basket by his desk. As he straightened himself he saw the child's eyes still on him, watching.

He turned to the Guard.

'ID card?' he asked.

'No.'

Papa Louis didn't understand.

'But there must be! Everyone has . . . '

'What's it matter?' said the Guard. 'There's no one to take the kid in, no family left, so it doesn't matter who she was, does it?'

For the first time, Papa Louis noticed something beneath the usual arrogant Officiate manner. And it wasn't just that the Guard was in a hurry to dump the baby and get home. He was desperate to leave.

'How do you know there's no family, if there's no ID?' asked Papa Louis. After all, he didn't like being taken for a complete idiot.

The Guard glanced nervously at the ceiling.

'It's all right,' said Papa Louis, 'the cams are broken.'

The Guard was only a boy, really. Maybe no more than seventeen. Papa Louis smiled, hoping to encourage him. But it was no good. He was frightened.

'Look,' said the Guard, 'forget the ID. He's lucky enough I got him here, all right?'

Papa Louis shivered, and not because of the early morning chill that clung to the drab little office. No, he'd caught the shiver of fear from the Guard. Did the Officiate have a particular interest in this death?

'When you rang the night bell, you said a car crash,' said Papa Louis. 'Is that right?'

The Guard hesitated. Papa Louis waited, sensing that the boy could give him more if he didn't push too hard.

'She'd . . . run off the road. She'd been . . . '

'She'd been what?' asked Papa Louis gently. Was this

boy struggling with his conscience? It looked like it. Maybe even Officiate Guards had a conscience.

'I was the first one there, all right?' said the Guard, twitching a defensive glance at him. 'I saw the baby on the back seat. I got him out and took him to my car.'

'And the mother?'

Now the Guard looked straight at Papa Louis.

'There was a hole in the windscreen . . . '

'She'd been shot?'

The Guard shrugged and threw another nervous glance at the ceiling. 'Then some Senior Officiate turned up and they ordered me away.'

Papa Louis could see that the boy was shaking now. He reached out a hand to his shoulder. He felt shaky himself.

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'Did they see the baby?' he asked.

The Guard shook his head.

'You did the right thing,' said Papa Louis. 'But the mother . . . '

The Guard turned to leave. As he reached the door, he said, 'The car's number. It was 734719.'

Papa Louis swung round to the desk and keyed the number into his notepad. When he turned back to thank him, the Guard was gone.

Papa Louis puffed out a long sigh and stared at the child, who was probing the space around him with huge, confused eyes.

'Sorry, fella, no way of knowing your name at the moment. So until I know, we'll call you Fella, how's that?' He bent towards the basket and the baby's eyes found him

and locked on to him again. He bounced his arms against the air. And then he started to cry.

Papa Louis lifted him and snuggled him into the crook of his elbow. But this did nothing to soothe him. It made him wriggle and scream, his face scrunched and red.

It was then that he felt something odd about the shape of the child. Something hard, unbending, at the base of his spine. He sat and laid him gently face down over his knees. Fella began to scream. Papa Louis worked quickly, trying to free the child from whatever it was that was hurting him. He pulled at the nappy and saw a plastic bag stuffed into it. He glanced round to check he was alone and then pulled out the bag and opened it.

The moment he saw what was inside, his heart started to pound painfully. A paperbook. Very small, but unmistakably a paperbook. Why hide it in such a place? The mother *must* have done it. But *why* would she have it? You hardly ever saw a paperbook. Only if it was an instruction manual for a computer or housechore device, and this was neither of these.

This was a completely different kind of thing. No pictures, diagrams, or figures. Just words, words, words. And not ordinary words. It was even hard to be sure that it was Island language, because it was in the old-fashioned style. It was done with a pen held in the hand; yes, it must be! Papa Louis stared at it in astonishment. It was a long, long time since he had seen pen-writing. The words were so densely packed, the shapes of the letters so unfamiliar. He shivered again, so suddenly that the paperbook snapped shut in his hands.

It was this way of writing, with a pen held in the hand, that they used to use in the Downzone in the Time Before. Could it possibly be that Fella's mother had written it? No, it wasn't possible. Perhaps she had found the paperbook and hidden it. But why? You wouldn't hide something like this without reason and you would have no reason unless you could read it. But in Papa Louis's lifetime and even before that, no one had ever been taught to read or write pen-writing on this Island.

The child had fallen quiet. As if he knew that this was a moment on which his whole life turned.

The silence deepened. Papa Louis could hear the white noise in his own head and the fearful pulsing of blood at his temples. He could feel the gentle thud of Fella's tiny heart against his knees and the warmth of this strange little paperbook as he turned it over and over in his hands.

He knew he should hand it in to the Officiate.

Instead, with shaking hands, he locked it in the safe.

And then, that first night of his life with Fella, Papa Louis left the child with Annie, the kindest of the women who worked at the Orphanage. She bathed him and changed his nappy. She tried to feed him. She cuddled and rocked him, but he wouldn't stop crying. Officiate rules said that children were to be drugged if they cried too much, but Papa Louis had never allowed that.

So, while Annie rocked, Papa Louis set out to try and find the other thing that sometimes worked. At least, that's what he told himself he was doing at the time. But really, he went because he was curious. That was what drove him to

look up the address where the car was registered. To seek out the place where Fella and his mother had lived.

He took the little van and headed off between the rows of dark tower blocks that surrounded the Orphanage. The dead woman's home, in Blue Boulevard, was in one of the B-grade areas on the other side of town. He found the place after about half an hour of driving round the Boulevards, along rows of identical four-bed detached villas which were as bleak, in their way, as the dark towers of his own E-grade zone. His luck was in. Even though the sun wasn't up yet, there was a light on in one of the neighbouring houses. A woman in a primrose-coloured housecoat opened the door, frowning, shivering in the grey morning.

'Never met her, only seen her once or twice,' she said when asked about the woman next door. She looked suspicious. Papa Louis showed his ID.

'She's dead,' he explained. 'Killed in a car crash. She had a child . . .'

'Nothing to do with us,' said the woman.

Papa Louis looked at her hard little face. Useless to explain what he was after. She was already pushing the door closed.

Well, Louis old pal, he thought, as the door clicked shut in his face, you're just going to have to risk it.

So he went round to the back of the house and broke in. It wasn't hard. He didn't actually have to break anything and there was no alarm system. There was a tiny window open and he managed to get his arm through and open the larger casement below it. He paused to get his breath. He was

getting a bit fragile for this sort of thing and it took a few minutes to get his stiff old legs folded up and through the window. At last he was sitting on the draining board.

He never felt good about resorting to this. But it was necessary. The Officiate understood nothing about children who'd lost their parents. They'd 'dispose' of the whole household, having neither the imagination to think nor the heart to care that a child in distress could suck a tiny breath of comfort from the last, lingering scent of its mother. So sometimes he, Papa Louis, Director of Orphanage 206, became a raider of dead people's linen.

There was nothing much to dispose of in this house. As he glanced into each sparsely furnished room looking for some clue as to who or what this woman had been, he saw nothing beyond the usual household equipment. Upstairs he found a nightdress in the bed. He took the pillowcases off the pillows and stuffed one inside the other, along with the nightdress. That should be enough.

He cast a glance around the bare room, which was now being washed by the first light of low winter sun. Suddenly, he could feel the dark gaze of the baby he had left at the Orphanage.

Papa Louis will try to take care of your child, he told the rumpled, empty bed. He'll do his best.

He had just decided to have a more thorough search of the place, when a movement on the edge of his vision made him glance out of the window at the Boulevard below. A large black car had turned into the end of the road and was climbing the hill towards the house.

Papa Louis ran back down the stairs and out through the back door. The garden was completely enclosed at the back by a high fence. He turned down the side alleyway, his only way back to the van. Too late. The car, a luxury Officiate vehicle, had stopped outside the house.

He hunkered down behind the waste bins in the alleyway, his heart racing. An armed guard got out of the front of the car and opened the rear door for a man to emerge. This man was not in uniform. But he must be far, far higher rank than the armed thugs who were driving him.

Papa Louis shrank back as the men approached the house. He heard the splintering of the door as it was broken down.

He waited a few moments more, and then, on shaking legs, hurried down the drive and back to the van.

Lucky that part of the Boulevard was on a steep slope. Lucky he could take the brake off and let the van roll silently away out of sight. Because the very last thing he wanted at that moment was to be heard or seen.