

**Wolf Haas, SILENTIUM!**

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## **Chapter 1**

So what's happened *this* time? And wouldn't you know it'd be in the Marianum, that's where you'd think a nice little ten-year-old farm boy goes in one end and comes out the other eight years later as a half-baked priest. No wonder nobody suspected a thing for so long. Because incredible, actually, that in the most squeaky-clean seminary boarding school in Salzburg, of all places, something like this could happen.

But about that squeaky clean. I didn't mean it in the strictly hygienic sense of course. Because always a bit of a stink in any boarding school, let's say evaporation coming off boys not exactly a rose garden. And when the Marianum suddenly needed a detective, he picked right up on those distinctive smells in just a few days. Because that sort of school has smells you won't find anywhere else.

Of course schoolrooms always stink, that's for sure, and teachers even get hardship pay for it, and I think that's perfectly okay. Because when you're locked in a classroom with twenty, thirty adolescents, you naturally get the idea you'd happily swap any pupil—who doesn't know from nothing anyway—for a fragrant, blooming sapling.

But boarding school totally different again. When Brenner got to the Marianum and moved into the empty assistant prefects' staff room, the smell reminded him of the police barracks right off. Because nineteen years as a cop before going freelance, then of course everything's gonna remind you of the police for the rest of your life.

And believe it or not, each floor in this huge old fortress of a school had its own special smell. But no way could you place those smells. The kitchen and refectory were on the first floor, but rancid food smells wafted through the whole building, and though they'd plunked the new chapel right in the roof—four floors above the kitchen—it too often reeked like a veritable tavern.

The roof chapel was an architectural masterpiece. Ten years ago they'd put this super modern bird's nest on top of the old cloister walls, and you almost had a stroke when you went in because church ceiling all glass, virtually heaven within your grasp. But technically problematic, odor-wise. Because for some reason it sucked up the fumes from the kitchen.

But incredible how fast a person gets used to new smells, and three days later Brenner never really noticed them. No problem, naturally, because the seminary principal hadn't hired him to analyze the smells anyway. Mr. Principal certainly didn't need a detective for those stinks! But listen up, I'm going to tell you something.

Brenner wasn't normally any kind of odor gourmet. If you'd been a cop for nineteen years then you'd have had plenty of opportunities to wean yourself off any sensitivity of the sort. And Brenner not so much the overbred kind anyway. See it just by looking at him. A squat hunk with a face the smoothest where there were pockmarks, because two deep folds cut almost an inch deep into his cheeks. It would take an essay contest with the bar set very low to find out whether we're talking about an Austrian ex-flatfoot here or a famous French perfume sniffer.

Because it was in the Marianum of all places where those smells gave him so much food for thought, because once again—how'll I put it—I don't want to mince words: that's just the way Brenner was. It's what often got in his way during an investigation. Always the least important thing first. It was a disease Brenner could never shake off. Always those complicating detours. When he was still a cop his bosses tried to knock it out of him, but no way, Brenner didn't budge an inch off his method. And the worst thing about it is that it's infectious. I'm just noticing that I've started off with the least important thing too. Because four dead bodies at the finish, so basically why do I have to keep forever harping on those smells. But since I'm at it, I'll tell you very fast how come Brenner found those smells so interesting all of a sudden in his old age.

On Brenner's very first day at the Marianum the young principal asked him to come to his office at ten that evening. Listen up, easy to keep this in mind: principal's the boss, prefects the sub-bosses. Brenner was surprised a man that young could even be a priest let alone the head of the archbishopric's special

seminary school, in practice tough job. But the young principal had pulled it off, dignity and all. And *he* was the one who said it could not go on like this, we must get a detective who will get to the bottom of it.

His police buddies had chipped in for a digital watch for Brenner's retirement three years ago, and when it hopped on to ten p.m., Brenner knocked at the door. But it wasn't the principal who opened it, because he wasn't there alone. It was an old prefect with a harelip who did, the one who'd shown Brenner the assistant prefects' room that afternoon. His gray beard was closely trimmed so you couldn't see his harelip right away. But it's always a damn tricky business to hide a flaw, like bald guys combing their last few hairs over their pates and making themselves look all the balder. Or for that matter take murderers that act extra normal and the handcuffs click on right away just because you said "Nice day" to a cop.

And now, though you could hardly see his harelip through his beard, his speech defect was of course all the more obvious. Probably operations and all that in childhood, but now the old prefect had sort of a unique way of speaking, kind of like people with their third set of teeth after they've tucked away their magnificent dentures for the night in a glass of Polident. Now Brenner felt that his own voice too was sort of unique when the first prefect introduced him to another, "Our sports prefect, Fitz."

This prefect's wiry hair wobbled like antennae when he shook hands, hearty greeting so to speak. It struck Brenner that he wasn't wearing a black suit with a cross stuck on it like the two priests but was wearing jeans and a white shirt instead. Simple explanation: he wasn't a priest but a lay prefect. And because the sports prefect was sitting between the principal and the harelipped prefect, it made for a droll picture, like that word sounding a lot like "sympathetic." A black to the left, a black to the right, and a white in the middle, so . . . symmetric! And almost stiff as in the old oil paintings that darkened the Marianum's corridors, the smell of the oil greasing the air along with the cooking oil and the floor cleaner, in effect museum.

But Brenner would certainly not have noticed all this if an inscription in gold lettering weren't glowing above those three heads:

## SILENTIUM!

The inscription was squarely on the principal's office wall, that made the whole scene for Brenner a bit other worldly for a moment. As a matter of fact he'd seen this inscription all day in the corridors and study halls and even the washrooms; the pupils were reminded at every turn: SILENTIUM! here, SILENTIUM! there. And I must say completely understandable because in a boys' school you've really got to watch out that the racket doesn't get to you, there's screaming all day long, so it could easily happen that a housemaster's nerves get all shot and fires right into that barrage of noise and for all that non-stop screaming you can't hear your own machine gun.

Now the Marianum nipped that in the bud by saying, we're not getting into that; only whispering was allowed most of the time, and complete *silentium* the rest of the time. A bit spooky of course when a few hundred kids don't utter a peep. And maybe that was part of the reason the smells stood out so much, front and center.

Now interesting connection: it was precisely for *silentium* that the sports prefect was the key man. It's not like politics or TV where they say the dumbest guy is given sports, just the opposite: sports almost the most important thing in a boy's boarding school. Because an adolescent has energy you can't believe, of course, and it's got to go somewhere or he'll get so antsy that you can go and write SILENTIUM a hundred times, but hopeless without sports, because without sports you'd have to count yourself lucky if he didn't tear your kitchen maid to bits.

But tonight young Mr. Principal was acting like the kitchen maid himself, in other words, dishing out so much food that his conference table had vanished under a heap of goodies: family-size package of peanuts, family-size package of potato chips, family-size package of Soletti brand pretzel sticks, family-size package of salted snack food, family-size package of goldfish, family-size package of TUC salted cheese crackers. Because I'm thinking, if you're not permitted to

have a family these days, you at least want to demolish a family-size package now and then, sort of like running amok.

As Brenner was watching the young religious boss tear open one family-size package after the other, he remembered reading something on a condom automat in the Linz police canteen: “CONVENIENT FAMILY SIZE.” Actually bad choice of words because the product was trying to prevent families. To be on the safe side Brenner stuffed a few peanuts into his mouth at once so he wouldn’t tell that story. Because maybe inappropriate with priests present.

And here’s how a wall inscription can help once again. Because if it weren’t for the gold, cautioning SILENTIUM! on the wall, Brenner’s comment would definitely have slipped out. He noticed the artist had shaped his script very prettily, quite delicate lettering, but he hadn’t used a real letter “t” in the middle but cheated by slipping in a plain and simple cross.

If you don’t talk about the condom thing of course, it can easily happen that you say nothing at all. And the three prefects also said nothing. But believe it or not no *silentium* emerged anyway because the salty snack food was being crunched between their teeth, kids’ birthday party not even close.

“A beer perhaps?” young Mr. Principal asked at last.

The harelipped prefect spread all his ten fingers and rotated his hands a few times as if deciding how to reply. But then his peculiar squeaky voice came out with, “One swallow may not do any harm.”

*May!* For a moment Brenner thought it was a peculiarly clerical formality to avoid the hard “t,” as in “might” or “cannot,” and to say as indirectly as possible, “One swallow may not do any harm.” But the real reason why he was missing the “t” was of course his cleft palate. Because you mustn’t forget one thing. Nowadays they do marvelous repair jobs on harelips, but the prefect definitely already over sixty, and back then they only took the lousiest shoemakers and retrained them to be surgeons. You could say you were real lucky if the scalpel didn’t slip too often during the operation.

As the young principal was dragging in a case of beer, it occurred to Brenner that he was a touch flabby in spite of his young years. On the whole a big, good-looking man, with black hair and pale skin, like a true silent-film actor.

When the bishop made him a prefect in the Marianum some years ago, there was talk even at the time that it was because of those pious, churchy types in his former parish. Because back then those ladies milled around that newly consecrated priest, so's you wouldn't believe. You'd think there wasn't an altar there but an Adriatic beach and he wasn't a priest but an emcee at a holiday club, and it sure wasn't just the body of Christ that was venerated there but the body of his vicar was a little bit of a party to it.

But as I said, years ago, and meanwhile he'd become the youngest principal in the Marianum's history. Incredible how the man grew. Maybe his only weakness was that his appetite developed just as incredibly. Though he always managed to get his weight under control during Lent, and you could talk with him for hours about the latest diet in women's magazines like *Brigitte*, he never got rid of that flab.

He simply sinned too much at times, now and then with chocolate, then with ice cream, and today, for instance, sinning again big time with beer and salted crackers. Because the Reverend Father knocked down his beer so fast—you've never seen anything like it.

"Salty crackers make you thirsty," he nodded, as if he had to justify himself to himself, and filled everybody's glasses. But I don't think it was just the salty crackers. It was a little bit too of that painful item burning on the tip of his tongue. He'd eventually have to tell Brenner why he'd asked him to come. But first another raising of the glass, unbelievable what he was tossing down.

But he did come out with it, very slowly, with what he was expecting from Brenner, but he had to go back and start with Adam and Eve because Brenner didn't even know that a new bishop was about to be nominated.

"We are of course elated," he said emphatically, "that the pope's preferred candidate is from our institution."

"Most elated," the old prefect with the harelip nodded in assent. I don't know how it happened, but he was able to make a "t" all of a sudden, maybe the beer loosened him up.

“Although one must add with all due modesty,” the sports prefect interjected, actually cringing a bit, in other words modesty. And out of sheer modesty he forgot to say what was to be added with all due modesty.

“Yes, of course,” the young principal nodded, because he knew exactly what his colleague was going to say, in effect understood with his eyes closed. And Brenner somehow caught on during the course of the evening. No need to be so self-important because for generations, if not for centuries, virtually all bishops came from the Marianum, and even on the secular side, everybody from Bürgermeister to provincial governor and back.

And then of course the second point involving pride. Or put it this way. That second point where you couldn't have been proud at all.

“The rumors!” the old harelipped prefect said, raising a forefinger.

And I think this was the real reason why Brenner had to deal with the rumors in the school for the next two days. Because the old prefect must have been feeling the beer a little for him to keep saying over and over in his penetrating polyp's voice, like a veritable hypnotist, “The rumors!”

Prefect Fitz took the empty case outside, but not because of the rumors. Because believe it or not he came back with a real proper small barrel of beer. And did they ever have a culture of refinement there in the Marianum! They didn't drink beer from the barrel with the same glass they drank bottled beer from. Instead, the prefect brought out four steins, gray liter jugs with a Capuchin monastery's crest on them. They were probably gifts from a visiting Capuchin abbot, because only secular priests in the Marianum of course, no monks in habits.

When the steins were filled, the four men clinked them together till they shook, and Brenner asked, “What sort of rumors?”

The principal and Fitz the sports prefect were so aghast when they looked at him that Brenner thought for a second that his mental note about family-size packaging had slipped out in his beer fog after all. Out of embarrassment he quickly activated his liter mug. But Fitz the sports prefect had done such a dumb job of pouring that half the stein was suds, and when Brenner wiped the foam out

of his eyes his gaze fell on the inscription over the principal's head, on the gold cross in the middle of the word SILENTIUM!

Then of course scales from his eyes because the conspicuous "t" in effect hint from God.

"What sort of rumors?" he asked in exactly the same tone of voice, as if he had said it correctly before.

"Stories," Fitz the sports prefect said. He had a somewhat strange manner of speaking but his "t" flawless. "Just rumors!"

He obviously couldn't hold his liquor as well as the other two teachers. Possibly being a consecrated priest gives you a bit of an edge on demon drink, because the young principal sat there as stiffly as at the outset, and the most you could say about the harelipped prefect was that the "t" came and went whenever he felt like it but otherwise not the slightest tip-off.

"What sort of rumors?" Brenner asked again. Asking precise, direct questions normally wasn't his strong suit, since he'd rather fritter away the time with minor matters. And I suspect the alcohol helped him put the question this time. Because alcohol often very helpful when you're in a position of having to persist in asking one and the same thing as often as possible.

But the harelipped prefect didn't answer. And Fitz the sports prefect also sat there in silence, his left foot vibrating like a sewing machine, looking like a man in a tightly cramped sitting position. And the principal said nothing either. It looked to Brenner as if he'd be talking to the wall. Because at least the wall was saying something, but always, a pig-headed SILENTIUM!

But when Brenner finally learned what the rumors were, he could understand in a way why these gentlemen had to keep guzzling until early morning until they'd come out with the ultimate details. He finally knew everything by four o'clock. He knew about Schorn, the candidate for bishop; he knew that Monsignor Schorn was the spiritual advisor in the Marianum thirty years ago, and he even knew what a spiritual advisor was.

Listen up, it's not all that hard: principal boss for administration, prefect for education, spiritual advisor for salvation. Because a prefect must often be strict, some people rightly said it's not really ideal for a pupil's spiritual

development if he had to go to his own prefect for confession, say, in effect basis of trust. That's why they had a spiritual advisor who did meditation to music, meditation with photographs, confession in his room, stuff like that.

A boy could in theory go to the spiritual advisor and complain about the prefect, and the spiritual advisor wouldn't have punished him but only sympathy. He was a very important contact for the littlest kids especially, because prefects often very strict, I wouldn't want to say "psycho-terrorists," people you might find in some sects, but strict. Even *very* strict. And so the spiritual advisor was of course a refuge, very important all right, you'd better believe it. There were some ten-year-olds who'd run to the spiritual advisor every evening, they'd already thought up some sins just to have a reason for going to confession in his room, or let's say, meditation with photos and cuddly music or a little hand-holding to cope with the devil of homesickness.

The harelipped prefect kept butting in with "Rumors!" But by four in the morning, after they'd long been into the schnapps from Rocca di Papa, the young principal had confessed the whole affair to Brenner. And basically he'd nothing left to say. Because a former pupil had brought up some stories about Monsignor Schorn. Now, of all times, when the pope had said, let us proceed to appoint Schorn bishop.

The old prefect pointed out that you had to show some understanding for the spiritual advisor. He stood closer to the boys than the prefects did because of his office. And the former pupil probably resentful back then just because Schorn, the spiritual advisor, had made the pupil aware of his problems with hygiene. Children are often awfully vengeful, and they remember a thing like that for years and decades just because you said maybe once that water's over there for you to wash with.

"It's all the psychiatrist's fault," Fitz the sports prefect contended. Because the ex-pupil didn't come up with the idea to tell his stories all by himself. But marriage problems, and his wife had said, see to it that you get to a psychiatrist. Then of course pressure to perform, he suddenly believed he had to remember certain things way back from the year whatever, in other words hygiene class with spiritual advisor Schorn in the cellar showers.

Nowadays every class in the Marianum has its own shower room on each floor, but back then only forty shower stalls way down in the back of the school cellar, and the advisor just had to say to this pupil, you know what, you're a dear little boy, pretty blond curls and all, but too bad about those problems with hygiene!

But the spiritual advisor always very empathetic, he saw to it that nobody else picked up on it because of course embarrassing as all get out for a ten-year-old boy, right away you're the class laughing stock, don't even ask. Then the advisor said, next Sunday when everyone else is at mass I'll go down to the showers with you and show you how people really wash.

Things like this are always delicate issues, and the prefect with the harelip was perfectly right in saying that *somebody* has to explain such things to the boys.

"How are you supposed to determine after twenty-eight years what happened, exactly," he kept repeating. "When you consider that even the person in question can't recollect precisely himself."

Because it turned out that the person in question would remember more and more little by little only when at the psychiatrist's.

"Psychiatrists are just wheelers and dealers," Fitz the sport prefect chimed in, "they aren't about to kill their business by having patients remember everything all at once. You have to keep going for years and are allowed recollections only one thin slice at a time. Psychiatrists are just like dentists that set up eight appointments for one filling. Or that Russian high jumper."

Because there was once a Russian high jumper who always bettered his world record by a single centimeter although he'd jump ten centimeters higher in training, just so he could get a prize worth thousands every single time.

But that was near the end, when the conversation in the principal's office had more or less run its course. When it was slowly getting light out, Brenner hit the road. Basically not a long way home up to the fourth floor, but for some silly reason he often had to ask the banisters the way. And for some silly reason he had to keep thinking the whole time en route about that high jumper who had no problem going upstairs even without steps.

And for some reason it seemed to him that the whole Marianum reeked of beer in the middle of the night. You should know that Brenner came from Puntigam, where that beer comes from: Puntigamer. He couldn't forget his whole life long of course what it was like when all of Puntigam would stink when a low-pressure system arrived. And that was precisely the smell in his nose on his way home to the fourth floor.

In his assistant prefect's bed he reflected a while on the three gentlemen, the young, pale-faced principal, the prefect and his gray beard over his harelip, and the sports prefect and his nervous, sewing-machine knee jiggling away the whole time. But it wasn't in fact his knee that rattled but the key ring in his pants pocket. Because as a prefect you of course have keys to everything, classrooms, study halls, cellar doors, church under the roof, kitchen, private apartment, car and, and, and—it all adds up to a good-sized key ring, prison guard nothing by comparison.

Brenner could still hear that soft jingling in his sleep. Or put it this way. The school bell suddenly went off like a bombshell. Because motto, every morning at six without mercy: Thou shalt not steal the day from the Lord thy God. Sure, Brenner went back to sleep right away, but at twenty after six the bell again, because morning study time, at twenty to seven bell again, because mass, at quarter after seven bell again, because breakfast. Finally, he couldn't sleep anymore. But it was way too early to get up.

"Rumors," Brenner was thinking, as the smell of warm breakfast milk seeped into his room. And the next second he knew everything all in a flash. His memory hadn't kicked in by fits and starts but in a single burst.

In a flash Brenner in his assistant prefect's bed recalled what it was the former pupil remembered bit by bit on the psychiatrist's couch. How he once went all alone down to the cellar with the spiritual advisor instead of going to mass.

Brenner now recalled in a flash that the former pupil didn't remember until a year later how he, as a ten-year-old child, got undressed in the cellar below.

And not until a year later did it occur to him that the advisor said he could, as an exception, take off his underpants in the changing room, though that was only allowed in the shower stalls.

And not until a year later did he remember that the advisor also undressed a bit for the hygiene lesson.

And not until two months ago did he remember the word he'd then said to the spiritual advisor. Because perfect *silentium* at first, he remembered how the advisor took off his black priest's sweater with the silver cross stuck on it. And how he unbuttoned his white priest's shirt, revealing a lot of black hair underneath, still perfect *silentium*. And how he took off his white priest's undershirt and his black priest's shoes and his black priest's pants and stood beside the naked child in socks and shorts and in perfect shower-cellar *silentium*.

"Ahoy!" the ten-year-old boy had shouted all of a sudden, at the top of his lungs, just like in a pirate film on TV. It had taken him twenty-eight years to remember the innocent word he'd blared out as loud as he could into the sky of shower faucets above. "Ahoy!"

Because a priest usually only transforms bread into flesh and wine into blood, but now the tight-fitting priest's underpants were transformed into a sailing ship! Into a magnificent millionaire's yacht with billowing sails, virtual Atlantic crossing.

And he spiritual advisor turned on the water in all forty showers until the tile floor was completely flooded, and he sailed through the passageways among the forty shower stalls with his magnificent underpants ship and the little hygiene piglet on his lap as Able Seaman.

You can see how memory sort of got a bit lost in the mist.

That was why the principal said we must find out at once what exactly is behind all this [before the bishop is nominated](#). And the hare-lipped prefect said who knows what all he's going to remember, given enough time. And the sports prefect said, once it gets started, it usually never stops, the Russian high jumper kept raising the bar, cashed in x thousand, but compared with the fortune you pay a psychiatrist for a couple of memories, Adidas got their high jumper pretty cheap.

At any rate a shower wouldn't hurt, Brenner thought to himself in his assistant prefect's room. And then marvelous discovery. The hot water was really boiling hot and never-ending. Now he showered for so long that I must say, probably a modest world record. Because long showers for Brenner often the solution to many problems. But in episcopal candidate Monsignor Schorn's case, showers of course the beginning of all problems.

*4,715 words*