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The Lucifer Code

Michael Cordy

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The VenTec Foundation. Alaska.

Twenty-nine years later

Being unable to blink was the worst sensation. that, and the chill fear in her guts from knowing she was going to die.

When she awoke to find herself immobile on the laboratory couch, head shaved and eyes pegged open, Mother Giovanna Bellini knew what fate awaited her. Not only had she witnessed a hundred similar experiments but she had also contributed to them, administering the last rites to the subjects. Unlike her, however, they had been terminally ill. The imminence of their deaths and the act of dying had made them indispensable to the project.

Surely the scientists couldn't be responsible for this. Over the last nine months she had worked with them, helped them in what she thought was God's work. The Red Pope himself had appointed her to perform the last rites, explaining that she was contributing to a great and sacred mission. 'Don't question the scientists, Mother Giovanna, for they, like you, wear the scarlet crucifix of the Church of the Soul Truth on their chests.'

But it had been impossible to remain silent. She had been faithful to the Holy Father since he was a senior cardinal in the Vatican, choosing to follow him when he left to found his own ministry. Now, having been entrusted

with this most sacred responsibility, how could she betray that trust by saying nothing?

Stinging liquid was dropped into each eye but she couldn't recoil.

Dear God! Help me!

She willed the words from her lips but no sound came. Even her screams were silent. Her body had been switched off by the paralysing drug, which the blonde woman in the white bodysuit and reflective eye-protectors had injected into her veins.

At the outset, it was understood that Mother Giovanna would leave the laboratory immediately after administering the last rites to each experimental subject, but recently she had lingered outside the tinted glazed doors, curious to observe how they pinpointed the crucial moment of death. After witnessing the final stages of the last three experiments she had felt compelled to contact Sister Constance, her oldest, most trusted friend, and seek her advice.

Sister Constance had promised to respect her confidence and encouraged her to go direct to the Holy Father and tell him that the scientists weren't waiting for the patients to die, but killing them.

How did they know she had betrayed them? And how did they dare do this to her, knowing she had the Red Pope's protection?

Even as her upper body was raised and the hollow transparent sphere lowered over her head, she strained to see a flash of red in her peripheral vision - the tell-tale scarlet robes that would signal the arrival of Monsignor Diageo or perhaps the Red Pope himself. But as the glass sphere was sealed round her neck she saw no such sign of salvation.

It was made up of different textured layers and the refracted light shining through them had a cold beauty, like moonlight on a dark desolate lake, and

brought her no comfort. The blonde scientist raised the front section of the sphere as if it were an astronaut's visor. Contact lenses, large enough to cover the exposed eyeballs, were inserted in Mother Giovanna's eyes, scratching her corneas. Then a foil tab was stuck with gel to her right temple, making her shaven scalp itch.

Worse than the discomfort, though, was the knowledge that she had unwittingly stood by while others had suffered the same fate. She had been told they were all volunteers who felt nothing before the end, but now she knew that wasn't true. This frightened her more than anything else; she had sinned and needed absolution before she died.

As fear bled into despair she wanted to weep but no tears came.

Where are you, Holy Father? she screamed silently. Why won't you save me?

'The countdown's starting soon,' the blonde woman announced calmly.

Mother Giovanna's heart, one of the few muscles to defy the paralysing drug, pounded in her chest. She panicked, not because she was going to die but because she had not been absolved of her sins.

Forgive me, Lord, and have mercy on my soul. The transparent visor was replaced over her face. Then an odourless gas entered the sphere, bathing the departing world in a green aura. She heard the countdown start and knew that death awaited.