

God's Spy

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Published by Orion

Extract

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APOSTOLIC PALACE

Saturday, 2 April 2005, 9.37 p.m.

The man in the bed was no longer breathing. His personal secretary, Monsignor Stanislaw Dwisicz, who had spent the last thirty-six hours clinging to the dying man's right hand, burst into tears. The doctors on duty had to use force to pull Dwisicz away, then spent the next hour trying to bring the old man back to life. Their efforts went above and beyond the call of duty. As they undertook each successive attempt to preserve the man's life, the doctors knew they had to do everything in their power, if only for the sake of their consciences.

The Supreme Pontiff's private apartment would have been a surprise to the uninformed observer. The ruler before whom world leaders respectfully bowed their heads lived in conditions of utter simplicity. His private quarters were austere, the walls bare except for a crucifix, the furniture no more than a chair, a table and the hospital roll-away that, in the last few months of his illness had replaced the dark wooden bed. Stationed around it, the doctors were now doing everything they could to revive him, shedding large drops of sweat on to the immaculate white sheets, which four Polish nuns changed three times a day.

Doctor Silvio Renato, the Pope's personal physician, put an end to their futile efforts. He gestured to the nurses to cover the time-worn face with a white veil and then asked everyone to leave apart from Dwisicz. He drafted the death certificate then and there. The cause of death was obvious: the man's heart had collapsed, as had his circulatory system, both aggravated further by inflammation of

the larynx. Renato hesitated for a moment when it came to filling in the elderly man's name, although in the end, to avoid confusion, he chose the one he had been given at birth.

Once he had filled out and signed the document, the doctor handed it over to Cardinal Samalo, who had just entered the room. The cardinal, dressed in his red robes, had the distressing task of officially certifying the death.

'Thank you, doctor. With your permission, I'll proceed.'

'It's all yours, Your Eminence.'

'No, doctor. From here on, God is in charge.'

Samalo slowly approached the deceased's bed. At 78 years of age he had prayed to God many times to be spared this scene. He was a calm and peaceful man, but was well aware of the heavy load, the numerous responsibilities and duties, that now descended upon his shoulders.

He examined the body carefully. The man had reached 84 years of age, in the course of which he had overcome a bullet to the chest, a tumor in his colon and a complicated case of appendicitis. Parkinson's had gradually worn him down, a little more each day, eventually leaving him so weak that his heart had given out.

From the third-floor window of the Palace, the cardinal could see nearly two hundred thousand people swelling Saint Peter's Square. The rooftops of the surrounding buildings overflowed with antennae and television cameras. 'In just a short time there will be even more,' Samalo thought to himself. 'What's coming will overwhelm us. The people adored him; they admired the sacrifices he made, his iron will. This will be a blow to them, even if we've all been expecting it since January ... and more than a few people actually wanted it to happen. And then there's the other business we must deal with ...'

A noise came from the other side of the door, and the Vatican's head of security, Camilo Cirin, walked into the room ahead of the three cardinals who were charged with certifying the Pope's death. Worry and lack of sleep were etched on their faces as they drew close to the bed.

'Let's begin,' said Samalo.

Dwicz held a small, open case at Samalo's side.

The chamberlain lifted the white veil that covered the face of the

deceased and opened a tiny phial containing holy oils. He began to recite the millenary ritual in Latin:

‘Si vives, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.’ Samalo made the sign of the cross over the man’s forehead and continued. *‘Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominum quidquid . . . Amen.’* With a solemn gesture, he invoked the apostolic benediction. ‘By the power invested in me by the Holy See, I hereby grant you full forgiveness for and remission of all sins, and I bless you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.’

Next, he took a silver hammer out of the case the bishop was holding. Three times he gently tapped the forehead of the dead man, asking each time, ‘Karol Wojtyła, are you alive?’

There was no response. The chamberlain looked at the three cardinals who stood by the bed, all of whom nodded.

‘The Pope is dead. There can be no doubt.’

With his left hand, Samalo removed the Fisherman’s ring – the symbol of the Pope’s authority in this world – from the dead man’s right hand. Using his right hand he once again shrouded the face of John Paul II with the veil.

He took a deep breath, and looked at his three companions. ‘We have a lot of work ahead of us.’

CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA IN TRASPONTINA

VIA DELLA CONCILIAZIONE, 14

Tuesday, 5 April 2005, 10.41 a.m.

Inspector Paola Dicanti briefly closed her eyes and waited until they were accustomed to the darkness as she stood in the entrance to the building. It had taken her almost half an hour to get to the scene of the crime. If Rome was always in a state of vehicular chaos, after the Holy Father's death it was transformed into an auto-inferno. Thousands of mourners were arriving every day in the capital of Christendom in order to bid their last farewell to the body lying in state in Saint Peter's Basilica. This Pope had gone to the next world fêted as a saint, and there were already volunteers moving around the streets collecting signatures to begin the process of beatification. Every hour, eighteen thousand people passed in front of his mortal remains.

'A huge success for forensic medicine,' Paola commented to herself with irony.

Her mother had warned her before she left the apartment they shared on the Via della Croce: 'It will take too long if you go by Cavour. Go up Regina Margherita and down Rienzo,' she said as she stirred the semolina porridge she was cooking for her daughter, just as she had done every morning for thirty-three years.

So Paola had of course gone by Cavour, and had lost a good deal of time.

The taste of semolina lingered in her mouth. It was always the first thing she ate every morning. During the year she spent studying at FBI headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, she had missed it so much that it had nearly become an obsession. She had ended up

asking her mother to send her a big box of the porridge, which she used to cook in the microwave in the Behavioral Studies Unit. The taste wasn't the same, but simply having it had made it easier to be so far from home during a year that was both difficult and rewarding. Paola had grown up only two steps from Via Condotti, one of the most exclusive streets in the world, but her family was poor. She hadn't even known the meaning of the word until she went to the United States, a country with its own measure for everything. She had been overjoyed to return to the city she had hated so fervently when she was growing up.

In Italy, the Department for the Analysis of Violent Crime (the UACV, or *Unità di Analisi del Crimine Violento*) was created in 1995, with a specific focus on serial killers. It seems incredible that, until this date, the country ranked fifth in the world for the number of psychopaths it contained lacked a unit designed to track them down. Inside the UACV there was a special department known as the Laboratory for Behavioural Analysis (LAC, or *Laboratorio per l'Analisi del Comportamento*) founded by Giovanni Balta, Dicanti's teacher and mentor. Balta died at the beginning of 2004 after a sudden and massive heart attack, at which time Dottoressa Dicanti became *Ispettore Dicanti*, the head of the LAC's Rome office. Her FBI training and Balta's excellent reports on her work were what got her the job. On the supervisor's death, the LAC found its personnel drastically reduced: Paola became the entire staff. Even so, the department was part of the UACV, and they could count on technical support from one of the most advanced forensic units in Europe.

Nevertheless, as of that moment, they had yet to solve a single case. In Italy there were thirty serial killers running around free, all of them unidentified. Of these, nine were considered 'hot' cases, since they were connected to the most recent deaths on record. No new bodies had turned up since Dicanti had become head of the LAC, and the absence of any definitive evidence increased the pressure, so that at times her psychological profiles were the only lead the police had. 'Castles in the air', Carlo Troi called them. Troi was a physicist and mathematician by training, a man who spent more time on the phone than in the laboratory. Unfortunately, Troi was the UACV's Director and Paola's immediate boss, and every time they passed in the hallway he gave her a sarcastic look. 'My pretty

little novelist' was his nickname for her when they were alone – a mocking allusion to the abundant imagination that Dicanti poured into her profiles.

Paola was desperately hoping her work would begin to bear fruit, just so she could flaunt the results in the bastard's face. She had made the mistake of sleeping with him one night in a moment of weakness. Working until late each night, her guard down, her heart overwhelmed by an emptiness she could not name ... and then the time-honoured regrets the morning after. Especially when she reminded herself that Troi was married and nearly twice her age. He'd been a gentleman – hadn't gone on about it and was careful to keep his distance; but he never let Paola forget it either, hinting at what had happened with comments that were somewhere between sexist and charming. *God*, how she hated the man.

But now finally, for the first time since her promotion, she had a case she could tackle from the outset, one in which she wouldn't have to work with shoddy evidence gathered by dim-witted agents. She took the call in the middle of breakfast, and immediately hurried to her room to change. She combed her long, dark hair, tied it up in a bun, put away the trousers and jersey she had been going to wear to the office, and instead took out an elegant suit with a black jacket. She was intrigued: the caller hadn't supplied her with a single detail, except that a crime had been committed and that it fell within her area of expertise. They had summoned her to Santa Maria in Traspontina 'with the utmost urgency'.

And that's precisely where she was now, standing in the doorway of the church. Behind her, a surging mass of people milled about in a queue that stretched for almost two and a half miles, coming to an end just short of the Vittorio Emmanuel II Bridge. Paola looked back at the scene and it worried her. The people in the queue had spent the whole night there, but anyone who might have seen something would be far away by now. As they passed, some of the pilgrims glanced over at the discreet pair of carabinieri who were preventing the occasional group of worshippers from entering the church. The police diplomatically assured them that the building was undergoing repairs.

Paola took a deep breath and crossed the threshold. The church had one nave with five chapels on each side, and the air was filled

with the musty scent of old incense. The lights were dimmed, no doubt because that was how the church would have been when the body was discovered. It was one of Troi's mottos: 'Let's see it the way he did.'

She looked around, her eyes trying to pick out objects in the darkness. Two men were conversing in low tones at the rear of the church, their backs to her. A Carmelite friar, nervously praying the rosary at the foot of the baptismal font, stared at her as she surveyed the scene.

'Beautiful, isn't it, signorina? It dates from 1566. Constructed by Peruzzi, its chapels—'

Dicanti interrupted him with a firm smile: 'Sadly, brother, art is the last thing on my mind at the moment. I'm Inspector Dicanti. Are you the parish priest?'

'Indeed, ispettore. And I'm also the one who discovered the body. I'm sure that's of more interest to you. Blessed be the Lord, in days such as these ... A saint has departed and left us with devils in his stead!'

The Carmelite looked very old. He wore tortoiseshell glasses with thick lenses, and the traditional brown habit with a large scapulary knotted at the waist. A thick white beard covered his face. He walked to and fro around the font, hunched over and limping slightly. His hands nervously thumbed his prayer beads and shook uncontrollably at odd moments.

'Calm down, brother. What is your name?'

'Francesco Toma, ispettore.'

'Tell me, in your own words, what took place here today. I know you've probably been through all this six or seven times already, but it can't be helped – take my word for it.'

The friar exhaled. 'There's not much to tell. In addition to my pastoral duties, it is also my responsibility to take care of this church. I live in a small room behind the sacristy. I got up as I do every morning at six, washed my face and put on my robes. I crossed the sacristy and entered the church through a hidden door at the foot of the main altar. I went to the chapel of Our Lady of Carmen, where I say my prayers each day. I noticed that there were candles burning in front of the chapel of Saint Thomas, yet when I turned to go back to my room, they had all gone out. That's when I saw it. I started

running towards the sacristy, terrified because I thought the killer could still be in the church. Then I called the emergency number 113.'

'You didn't touch anything in the crime scene?'

'No, ispettore, nothing. I was frightened out of my wits, may God forgive me.'

'And you didn't try to help the victim?'

'He was clearly beyond any earthly help.'

A figure moved towards them down the main aisle of the church. It was Detective Maurizio Pontiero from the UACV.

'Dicanti, hurry up. They're going to turn on the lights.'

'Just a second. Take this, it's my card. My mobile number is at the bottom. Call me any time if you remember anything else.'

'I will. And here's a gift for you.' The Carmelite handed her a small, brightly coloured card.

'Santa Maria del Carmen. Take it with you wherever you go. It will show you the way in these uncertain times.'

'Thank you.' Dicanti accepted the card from the old friar without giving it a second look, then slipped it into the pocket of her coat.

The inspector followed Pontiero through the church to the third chapel on the left, which was cordoned off with the UACV's classic red-and-white crime-scene tape.

'You were late,' Pontiero reproached her.

'The traffic was murder. It's a circus out there.'

'You should have taken Rienzo.'

Although Dicanti technically occupied a higher rung than Pontiero in the hierarchy of the Italian police, as the agent in charge of UACV field investigations he outranked any laboratory researcher, even someone like Paola, who was head of her department. Pontiero was 51 years old, trim and hot-tempered. He had a face like a shrivelled raisin and wore a perennial frown. It was quite clear to Paola that Pontiero adored her, but he took care not to let it show.

Dicanti was about to cross the police line but Pontiero's arm shot out to stop her. 'Hang on a second, Paola. You won't ever have seen anything like this before. It's completely sickening, I swear.' His voice was trembling.

'I'm sure I'll be able to handle it, Pontiero. But thanks.'

She walked into the chapel. An investigator from the UACV had

arrived before her and was taking photographs. At the rear of the chapel, against the wall, was a small altar adorned with a painting of Saint Thomas at the moment he pressed his fingers into Jesus' wounds. The body lay beneath it.

'Holy Mother of God!'

'I warned you.'

It was a spectacle straight out of Dante. The dead man was leaning against the altar and his eyes had been torn out, leaving two gaping wounds the colour of dried blood in their place. The mouth was wide open in a horrendous, grotesque grimace, and from it hung a greyish-brown object. In a sudden flash from the camera, Dicanti saw the worst: the victim's hands had been severed and were resting one on top of the other on a strip of white linen next to his body. The hands had been cleaned of any blood and one of them was adorned with an unusually large ring.

The dead man wore the black robes with red sash and piping of the cardinals.

Paola's eyes widened. 'Pontiero, please tell me it's not a cardinal.'

'We don't know yet, Dicanti. We're investigating who it might be, though there's not much left of the face. We held things up for you so you could take a look at the place and see it the way the killer did.'

'Where's the rest of the Crime Scene Analysis team?'

The analysis team were the UACV's big shots. All of them were highly skilled pathologists, specialising in the recovery of fingerprints, hairs and anything else a criminal might leave at the scene. They worked according to the rule that in every crime there is an exchange: the killer takes something and he leaves something behind.

'They're on their way. Their van is stuck in traffic on Cavour.'

'They should have gone by Rienzo.' The photographer put in his two cents.

'No one asked for your opinion,' Dicanti snapped back.

He left the chapel muttering unpleasant things about Paola under his breath.

'You've got to get that temper of yours under control.'

'Why in God's name didn't you call me earlier, Pontiero?' Dicanti asked, completely ignoring the detective's remark. 'This case is serious. Whoever did it is really sick in the head.'

'Is that your professional opinion, Dottoressa?' Carlo Troi strolled into the chapel, directing one of his mocking glances her way. He was enamoured of surprise entrances like that. Paola now realised that he must have been one of the two men talking at the back of the church when she came in; she blamed herself for letting him catch her unprepared. The other man wasn't far behind, but he didn't utter a word, nor did he enter the chapel.

'No. My professional opinion will be on your desk as soon as it's ready. I simply put forward the observation that, whatever else we might say, the man who committed this crime clearly has a few screws loose.'

Troi was about to say something, but at that moment the lights of the church came on; and then all of them saw something that they had previously missed: written on the floor of the church, close to the body of the dead man, were letters of no great size that spelled out:

EGO TE ABSOLVO

'Looks like blood,' Pontiero said, voicing what everyone else was thinking.

A mobile phone began to ring out the first chords of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus. The three of them looked at Troi's companion as he took the phone out of his coat pocket and answered the call. He barely said a word, just a few 'Ahas' and 'Hmms'.

After he hung up, he looked at Troi and nodded. 'It's as we feared,' the UACV's director said. 'Dicanti, Pontiero, needless to say, this is a very delicate case. The body we have here is that of the Argentine Cardinal, Emilio Robayra. The assassination of a cardinal in Rome is, in itself, an unspeakable tragedy, but it is even more vexing at the present moment. The victim was one of a hundred and fifteen men who in the next few days will participate in the Conclave to choose the next Supreme Pontiff. Consequently, the situation is extraordinarily delicate. This crime cannot reach the ears of the press for any reason whatsoever. Imagine the headlines: "Serial Killer Stalks the Papal Election". I don't even want to think about it.'

'Just a minute, you said a serial killer? Is there something we don't know?'

Troi cleared his throat and looked at the mysterious person who had come in with him. 'Paola Dicanti, Maurizio Pontiero, let me introduce you to Camilo Cirin, Inspector General of the Corpo di Vigilanza of Vatican City.'

Cirin nodded as he stepped closer. When he finally spoke, it seemed an effort, as if he strongly disliked having to use words at all: 'We believe this man is the second victim.'