

THE DEADLIEST OF ALL BATTLES  
IS ABOUT TO BEGIN ...

# THE DEVIL WILL COME

GLENN  
COOPER

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
LIBRARY OF THE DEAD

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## About the Book

### **A terrifying secret.**

A shocking discovery has been made deep within Rome's ancient catacombs. One that the Vatican is determined must never be made public - for the sake of all mankind.

### **A deadly conspiracy.**

But there are others who want to keep the truth hidden for far more sinister reasons, others who believe that not only are the church and the faith of a billion at threat, but life as we know it is about to be destroyed - for ever. And only one woman - a young Italian nun - can save us...

### **The nightmare is about to begin.**

## About the Author

Glenn Cooper graduated with a degree in archaeology from Harvard and got his medical degree from Tufts University School of Medicine. He has been the Chairman and CEO of a biotechnology company in Massachusetts and is a screenwriter and producer. He is also the bestselling author of *Library of the Dead*, its sequel *Book of Souls*, and *The Tenth Chamber*.

*Also by Glenn Cooper*

Library of the Dead

Book of Souls

The Tenth Chamber

THE  
DEVIL  
WILL COME

GLENN  
COOPER



arrow books

*The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,  
The Devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.*

*from*

***The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus***

*by*

*Christopher Marlowe*

# PROLOGUE

Rome, AD 1139

He kept his curtains parted to keep an eye on the night sky but the window faced west and he needed to look east.

The Palazzo Apostolico Lateranense, as the Romans called it, was vast - surely the largest and grandest building he'd ever seen. His native tongue was Irish, which was of no use in these parts. He found conversational Latin tough going so during his visit he and his hosts limped by with English. In English this was the Lateran Palace, the residence of the Pope.

He peeled away his thin blanket and fished in the dark for his sandals. He had bedded down in his simple monk's habit, which he wore despite his right to grander attire. He was Máel Máedóc Ua Morgair - in English, Malachy, Bishop of Down, and he was here as the guest of Pope Innocent II.

It had been a long, difficult journey from Ireland, taking him through the untamed lands of Scotland, England and France. The journey had consumed the entire summer and now in late September the air was already carrying a chill bite. In France he had stayed for a while with the esteemed clerical scholar Bernard of Clairvaux, a man whose intellect clearly matched his own. But he'd fooled Bernard with his faked piety and earnestness. He'd fooled them all.

Malachy's cell in the guest dormitory was a great distance from the high-ceilinged regal rooms of the Pope. He'd been in Rome for a fortnight and had only seen the old man twice: the first time for a perfunctory audience in his private chambers, the second as part of an entourage to tour the pontiff's pet project, the rebuilding of his favorite church, the ancient Santa Maria in Trastevere. Who knew how long it would be before he was summoned again to conduct his main business - petitioning Innocent to grant the pallia for the Sees (the seats of ecclesiastical authority) of Armagh and Cashel? But that was unimportant. What was vital was that he had succeeded in being in Rome on the twenty-fourth day of September in the year 1139 with midnight approaching.

Malachy crept carefully down long bare corridors, coaxing his eyes to accommodate to the darkness. He fancied himself a slithering creature of the night, gliding silently through the sleeping palace.

*They have no idea who I am.*

*They have no idea what I am.*

*And to think that they swallowed me whole and allowed me to dwell within their own belly!*

There was a staircase leading to the roof. Malachy had seen it before but had never taken it. He could only hope that he'd be able to make it unimpeded all the way up into the night air.

When he could climb no higher he turned an iron latch and put his shoulder against the heavy hatch until it budged and then yielded outwards. The pitch of the roof was steep enough that he had to take great care to keep his footing. To be safe he removed his sandals. The slates felt cold and smooth against the soles of his feet. He didn't dare sneak a look at the eastern sky until he'd pressed his back against the nearest chimney stack and jammed his heels against the slates.

Only then did Malachy feast his eyes on the heavens.

Over the great slumbering city of Rome the cloudless black firmament was perfect in every way. And just as he knew it would have, the lunar eclipse had already begun.

He'd spent years studying the charts.

Like the great astrologers before him, like Balbilus of ancient Rome, Malachy was a master of the heavens but he doubted whether any of his predecessors had ever had an opportunity like this. How disastrous, how catastrophic it would have been if the sky had been overcast.

He had to see the moon with his own eyes!

At the precise moment when he had to count the stars!

Complete eclipses of the moon were uncommon enough but was there ever one like tonight?

Tonight the moon was in Pisces, their sacred constellation.

And it had just completed its nineteen-year cycle, sinking once again below the sun's ecliptic to its South Node, the point of maximum adversity - the Devil's Tail, as astrologers called it.

This convergence of celestial events had perhaps never happened before and perhaps would never happen again! It was a night full of glorious portent. It was a night when a man like Malachy could make powerful prophecy.

Now all he could do was wait.

It would take almost an hour for the golden moon to slip into blackness, its orb nibbled away by an unseen giant.

When the moment came Malachy had to be ready, his mind had to be free of distraction. His bladder ached a bit so he pulled up his habit and let loose, watching in amusement as his urine streamed off the roof onto the Pope's garden. Too bad the old bastard wasn't standing there, looking up with open mouth.

The eclipse was a quarter done, then half, then three-quarters. He hardly felt the night chill. When the last of the moon's light was gone a penumbra suddenly formed, glowing thick and amber. And then Malachy saw what he'd

been waiting for. There were stars shining brightly through the penumbra. Not a few, not too many.

He'd have time enough to make his count and check it once before the penumbra disappeared.

Ten.

Fifty.

Eighty.

One hundred.

One hundred twelve!

He bore down mentally and repeated the exercise.

Yes, one hundred twelve.

The eclipse began to reverse and the penumbra collapsed.

Malachy carefully scuttled back down to the hatch, descended the stairs and made his way to his room, anxious not to lose a moment.

There he lit a fat candle and dipped a quill into a pot of ink. He began to write as fast as he could. He would write all night until the dawn came. He saw it clearly, as clearly as the stars brightly imprinted on his mind's eye.

Here in the Lateran Palace, here in Rome, here in the bosom of Christendom, the home of his great enemy and the enemy of his kind, Malachy had a lucid and certain vision of what would come to pass.

There would be 112 more Popes: 112 Popes until the end of the Church. And the end of the world as they knew it.

# ONE

Rome, 2000

'WHAT DOES K want?' the man asked. He was seated, nervously drumming thick fingers against the wooden arms of a chair.

Although the line had gone dead, the other man still had the phone in his hand. He set it back into its cradle and waited for a city bus to pass under their open window and for its annoying rumble to fade. 'He wants us to kill her.'

'So we'll kill her. We know where she lives. We know where she works.'

'He wants us to do it tonight.'

The seated man lit a cigarette with a gold lighter. It was inscribed TO ALDO, FROM K. 'I prefer more planning.'

'Of course. So do I.'

'I didn't hear you objecting.'

'That wasn't one of his people. It was K!'

The seated man leaned forward in surprise and exhaled a plume of smoke which floated off and merged with the wafting diesel fumes. 'He called you himself?'

'Couldn't you tell by the way I was speaking?'

The seated man drew on his cigarette so deeply that the smoke penetrated the deepest reaches of his lungs. When he breathed out he said, 'Then tonight she dies.'

Elisabetta Celestino was shocked at her own tears. When was the last time she'd cried?

The answer came to her in a vinegary rush of memory.

Her mother's death. At the hospital, at the wake, at the funeral and for days afterwards until she prayed for the tears to stop and they did. Even though she was a young girl at the time, she hated the wet eyes and the streaked cheeks, the awful heaving of the chest, the lack of control over her body and she vowed to banish henceforth this kind of eruption.

But now Elisabetta felt the sting of salty tears in her eyes. She was angry at herself. There was no equivalence between these long-separated events - her mother's passing and this email she'd received from Professor De Stefano.

Still, she was determined to confront him, change his mind, turn the situation around. In the pantheon of the Università Degli Studi di Roma, De Stefano was a god and she, a lowly graduate student, was a supplicant. But since childhood she'd possessed a gritty determination, often getting her way by peppering her adversary with a fusillade of reason and then launching a few piercing missiles of intellect to win the day. Over the years many had succumbed - friends, teachers, even her genius father once or twice.

As she waited outside De Stefano's office at the Department of Archeology and Antiquity within the heartless Fascist-style Humanities Building Elisabetta composed herself. It was already dark and unseasonably cold. The boilers weren't putting out any perceptible heat and she kept her coat on her lap draped over her bare legs. The book-lined corridor of the department was empty, the volumes secure in locked glass-fronted cabinets. The overhead fluorescent lights cast a white stripe on the gray-tiled floor. There was only one open door. It led to the cramped office she shared with three other grad students

but she didn't want to wait there. She wanted De Stefano to see her as soon as he rounded the corner so she sat on one of the hard benches where the students waited for their professors.

He kept her waiting. He was almost never on time. Whether it was his way of demonstrating his position on the totem pole or just scatterbrained time management, she was uncertain. He was nonetheless always appropriately apologetic and when he finally did come rushing in he spouted *mea culpas* and unlocked his office door hurriedly.

'Sit, sit,' he said. 'I was delayed. My meeting ran over, and the traffic was dreadful.'

'I understand,' Elisabetta said smoothly. 'It was good of you to come back tonight to see me.'

'Yes, of course. I know you're upset. It's difficult, but I think there are important lessons that in the long term will only help your career.'

De Stefano hung up his overcoat and sank into his desk chair.

She had rehearsed the speech in her mind and now the stage was hers. 'But, Professor, here's what I'm having great trouble with. You supported my work from the moment I showed you the first photographs of St Callixtus. You came with me to see the subsidence damage, the fallen wall, the first-century brickwork, the symbols on the plaster. You agreed with me that they were unique to the catacombs. You agreed the astrological symbology was unprecedented. You supported my research. You supported publication. You supported further excavation. What happened?'

De Stefano rubbed his bristly crew-cut. 'Look, Elisabetta, you've always known the protocol. The catacombs are under the control of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archeology. I'm a member of the Commission. All publication drafts have to be cleared by

them. Unfortunately, your paper was rejected and your request for funding to mount an excavation was also rejected. But here's the good news. You're broadly known now. No one criticized your scholarship. This can only work toward your benefit. All you need is patience.'

She leaned back in her chair and felt her cheeks flushing with anger. 'Why was it rejected? You haven't told me why.'

'I talked to Archbishop Luongo just this afternoon and asked him the same question. He told me the view was that the paper was too speculative and preliminary, that any public disclosure of the findings should await further study and contextual analysis.'

'Isn't that an argument for extending the gallery further to the west? I'm convinced, as you are, that the cave-in exposed an early Imperial columbarium. The symbology is singular and indicates a previously unknown sect. I can make tremendous progress with a modest grant.'

'To the Commission, it's out of the question. They won't support a trench beyond the known limits of the catacomb. They're concerned about larger issues of architectural stability. An excavation could trigger further cave-ins and have a domino effect that could lead back into the heart of St Callixtus. The decision went all the way up to Cardinal Giaccone.'

'I can do it safely! I've consulted with engineers. And besides, it's pre-Christian! It shouldn't even be the Vatican's call.'

'You're the last person to be naive about this,' De Stefano clucked. 'You know that the entire complex is under the Commission's jurisdiction.'

'But, Professor, you're on the Commission. Where was your voice?'

'Ah, but I had to recuse myself because I was an author on the paper. I had no voice.'

Elisabetta shook her head sadly. 'Then that's it? No chance of appeal?'

De Stefano's response was to splay his palms regretfully.

'This was going to be my thesis. Now what? I stopped all my other work and immersed myself in Roman astrology. I've devoted over a year to this. The answers to my questions are on the other side of one plaster wall.'

De Stefano took a deep breath and seemed to be steeling himself for something more. When it came out it shocked her. 'There's another thing I need to tell you, Elisabetta. I know you'll find this somewhat destabilizing and I do apologize, but I'm going to be leaving Sapienza, effective immediately. I've been offered a rare position at the Commission, the first non-clergy Vice-President in its history. For me, it's a dream job and, frankly, I've had it up to here with all the bull I have to endure at the university. I'll talk to Professor Rinaldi. I think he'll make a good adviser. I know he's got a full plate but I'll persuade him to take you on. You'll be fine.'

Elisabetta looked at his guilt-ridden face and decided there was nothing more to say besides a whispered, 'Jesus Christ.'

An hour later she was still at her desk, hands resting in her lap. She was staring out the black window onto the empty parking lot behind the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, her back to the door.

They crept up in their crepe-soled shoes and came into the office unseen.

They held their breath lest she should hear air escaping from their noses.

One of them reached out.

Suddenly there was a hand on her shoulder.

Elisabetta let out a short scream.

'Hey, beautiful! Did we scare you?'

She wheeled her chair around and didn't know whether to be relieved or angry at the sight of the two uniformed policemen. 'Marco! You pig!'

He wasn't a pig, of course - he was tall and handsome, her Marco.

'Don't be mad at me. It was Zazo's idea.'

Zazo jumped up and down like a little kid, giddy at his success, his leather holster slapping against his thigh. Since she was a toddler he'd delighted in scaring his sister and making her howl. Always scheming, always a prankster, always the motormouth, his boyhood nickname, Zazo - 'Be quiet, shut up' - had stuck fast.

'Thank you, Zazo,' she said sarcastically. 'I needed that tonight.'

'It didn't go well?' Marco asked.

'Disaster,' Elisabetta muttered. 'A complete disaster.'

'You can tell me about it over dinner,' Marco said.

'You're off work?'

'*He is,*' Zazo said. 'I'm pulling overtime. I don't have a girlfriend to feed me.'

'I'd pity her if you did,' Elisabetta said.

Outside, they braced themselves against the cutting wind. Marco buttoned his civilian greatcoat, concealing his starched blue shirt and white pistol belt. When he was off duty he didn't want to look like a cop, especially on a university campus. Zazo didn't care. Their sister Micaela liked to say that he loved being in the *Polizia* so much that he probably wore his uniform to bed.

Outside, everything moved and flapped in the wind except the immense bronze statue of Minerva, virgin goddess of wisdom, who loomed over her moonlit reflecting pool.

Zazo's squad car was pulled up to the steps. 'I can give you a ride.' He got behind the wheel.

'We'll walk,' Elisabetta said. 'I want the air.'

'Suit yourself,' her brother said. 'See you at Papa's on Sunday?'

'After church,' she said.

'Say hello to God for me,' Zazo said lightly. 'I'll be in bed. *Ciao.*'

Elisabetta double-looped her scarf and headed arm in arm with Marco toward her apartment on the Via Lucca. Ordinarily at nine o'clock the university area would be bustling but the precipitously falling thermometer seemed to catch people unawares and pedestrian traffic was sparse.

Elisabetta's flat was only ten minutes away, a modest walk-up shared with an orthopedic resident who was often on duty. Marco lived with his parents. As did Zazo, who occupied his childhood room like an oversized kid. Neither of them earned enough to rent their own place, though there was always talk of sharing an apartment after their next round of promotions. Ever since Elisabetta and Marco began seeing each other, if they wanted to hang out it had to be at her place.

'I'm sorry you had a bad day,' he said.

'You don't know how bad.'

'Whatever it is, you'll be fine.'

She snorted at that.

'You couldn't change the decision?'

'No.'

'Want me to shoot the old goat?'

Elisabetta laughed. 'Maybe if you just wounded him slightly.'

The traffic signal wasn't with them but they sprinted across the broad Viale Regina Elena anyway. 'Where's Cristina tonight?' Marco asked when they got to the other side.

'At the hospital. She's on a twenty-four-hour shift.'

'Good. Do you want me to stay over?'

She squeezed his hand. 'Of course I do.'

'Do we need to buy anything?'

'There's enough to whip something together,' she said. 'Let's just go home.'

Ahead was the student district off the Via Ippocrate. On a warm night it would have been thronging with young people smoking at cafés and browsing the small shops but tonight it was nearly deserted.

There was a short stretch of road that sometimes gave Elisabetta pause when she walked alone late at night, a poorly lit zone flanked by a graffiti-daubed concrete wall on one side and angled parking on the other. But with Marco she was fearless. Nothing bad could happen to her while he was at her side.

There was a telephone booth ahead. A tall man was standing inside. The tip of his cigarette glowed brightly with each drag.

Elisabetta heard footsteps coming fast from behind, then an odd, deep groan from Marco. She felt his hand slip from hers.

The tall man in the phone booth was approaching fast.

All of a sudden a heavy arm enveloped Elisabetta's upper chest from behind and when she tried to turn it slid around her neck and fixed her in place. The telephone-booth man was almost upon her. He had a knife in his hand.

A shot rang out, so loud that it interrupted the dreamlike quality of the attack.

The arm let go and Elisabetta pivoted to see Marco on the sidewalk struggling to lift his service pistol for another shot. The man who had grabbed her twisted toward Marco. She could see blood oozing from the man's shoulder onto the back of his camel-hair coat.

Wordlessly, the telephone-booth man rushed past, ignoring Elisabetta for the immediate threat. He and the wounded man fell upon Marco, their arms pounding down like pistons.

She screamed 'No!' and went for one of the flailing arms, trying to stop the killing, but the telephone-booth man threw her off, using his knife hand. She felt the blade slash her palm.

They resumed their butchery and this time Elisabetta grabbed blindly at the tall man's legs, trying to pull him away from Marco's body. Something gave, but it wasn't him - it was his trousers, which started to slide down his waist.

He rose and swatted Elisabetta violently across the face with a forearm.

She fell to the sidewalk, aware of blood - Marco's blood - spreading towards her. She saw the man whom Marco had shot squatting on his haunches, breathing hard under his stained coat.

There were shouts in the distance. Someone called out from a high-rise balcony half a block away.

The telephone-booth man approached and knelt deliberately beside Elisabetta. His stony face was blank. He raised his knife hand over his head.

There was another shout, closer by, someone yelling, 'Hey!'

The man swung round toward the call.

In the seconds before he turned back to Elisabetta and crashed his fist against her chest, just before she lost consciousness, she noticed a strange, disturbing detail.

She couldn't be sure - she would never be sure - but she thought she saw something protruding from the man's back just above his loosened trousers.

It was something that didn't belong there, something thick, fleshy and repulsive, rising out of a swarm of small black tattoos.

# TWO

## The Vatican, present day

PAIN WAS HIS constant companion, his personal tormentor, and because it had become so intertwined with his mind and body, in a perverse way it had also become his friend.

When it gripped him hard, causing his spine to stiffen in agony, he had to stop himself from involuntarily uttering the oaths of his youth, the street language of Naples. He had a button he could push which would release a pulse of morphine into his veins but beyond occasional lapses of weakness, usually in the middle of the night when sleep seemed so dear, he avoided its use. Would Christ have availed himself of morphine to ease his suffering on the cross?

But when the worst of the present spasm receded, its passing left a pleasurable void. He was grateful for the teaching the pain imparted: that normalcy was a dear thing and a simplicity to be cherished. He wished he'd been more cognizant of this notion during his long life.

There was a gentle rap on his door and he responded in as strong a voice as he could muster.

A Silesian nun shuffled into the high-ceilinged room, her gray habit nearly brushing the floor. 'Holiness,' she said. 'How are you feeling?'

'Much the same as an hour ago,' the Pope said, attempting a smile.

Sister Emilia, a woman not much younger than the elderly pontiff, approached and began fussing with the items on his bedside table. 'You didn't drink your orange juice,' she chided. 'Would you prefer apple?'

'I'd prefer to be young and healthy.'

She shook her head and carried on with her business. 'Let me raise you a little.'

His bed had been replaced with a motorized hospital model. Sister Emilia used the controls to elevate his head and when he was safely upright she held the drinking straw to his dry lips and stared sternly until he relented and took a couple of gulps.

'Good,' she said. 'Zarilli is waiting to see you.'

'What if I don't want to see him?' The Pope knew that the old nun lacked even a rudimentary sense of humor so he let her silence last for only a few seconds and then told her that his visitor was welcome.

Dr Zarilli, the pontiff's private physician, was waiting in an anteroom outside the third-floor papal apartment with another doctor from the Gemelli Hospital. Sister Emilia ushered them into the bedroom and parted the long cream curtains over the Piazza St Pietro to let in the waning sunlight of a fine spring day.

The Pope raised his arm weakly and gave the men a small official wave. He was wearing plain white pajamas. His last therapy had left him bald so for warmth he wore a woolen cap which had been knitted by the aunt of one of his private secretaries.

'Your Holiness,' Zarilli said. 'You remember Dr Paciolla.'

'How could I forget?' the Pope replied wryly. 'His examination of my person was very thorough. Come closer, gentlemen. Can Sister Emilia get you some coffee?'

'No, no, please,' Zarilli said. 'Dr Paciolla has the results of your last scans at the clinic.'

The two men with their black suits and grim faces resembled undertakers more than doctors and the Pope made light of their appearance. 'Have you come to advise me or bury me?'

Paciolla, a tall cultured Roman accustomed to tending to rich and powerful men, didn't seem fazed by the setting of the house-call or this particular patient. 'Simply to inform Your Holiness - certainly not to bury you.'

'Well, good,' the Pope said. 'The Holy See has more important matters to attend to than calling for a Conclave. Give me the report, then. Is it white smoke or black?'

Paciolla looked at the floor for a moment, then met the Pope's steady gaze. 'The cancer has not responded to the chemotherapy. I'm afraid it's spreading.'

Cardinal Bishop Aspromonte poked his large balding head into the dining room to make sure that Cardinal Diaz's favorite sparkling wine was on the table. It was a trifling detail for the Secretary of State and Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church but it was entirely within character. His private secretary, Monsignor Achille, a wiry man who had long ago followed Aspromonte from Genoa to the Vatican, directed his attention to the green bottle on the sideboard.

Aspromonte mumbled his approval and disappeared for a moment, only to enter again when he heard the telephone ring. 'That's probably Diaz and Giaccone.'

Achille picked up the dining-room phone, nodded, then commanded starchily, 'Send them up.'

'Five minutes early,' Aspromonte said. 'We've trained our guests well over the years, haven't we?'

'Yes, Your Eminence, I believe we have.'

Monsignor Achille escorted Cardinals Diaz and Giaccone into the book-lined study where Aspromonte waited with his blue-veined hands clasped over his expansive belly. His private rooms were splendid, thanks to recent renovations

courtesy of a wealthy Spanish family. He greeted the two men warmly, his jowls wobbling when he grasped their hands, then sent Achille scurrying for aperitifs.

The three old friends wore red-trimmed black cassocks with wide red sashes but that was the extent of their similarities. Cardinal Diaz, the venerable Dean of the College of Cardinals who had formerly held Aspromonte's job as Secretary of State, was at seventy-five the oldest but the most imposing. He towered over his colleagues. In his youth in Malaga before joining the priesthood he had been quite the boxer, a heavyweight, and he had carried this athleticism into old age. He had large hands, a squared-off face and ample grey hair but his most remarkable feature was his posture which gave him a strong upright appearance even when he was sitting.

Cardinal Giaccone was the shortest, with a deeply lined and jowly pug face which could mysteriously change from scowl to grin with only the slightest shift of musculature. The little hair that he had left was confined to a fringe above his beefy neck. Though otherwise nondescript, if all the cardinals were to assemble on a sunny day he could always be picked out of the crowd because of his trademark oversized Prada sunglasses which made him look like a film director. He relaxed now, his worry about being late dissipated. There had been a traffic snarl-up on the way back from the Via Napoleone where, as President, he had held his monthly meeting with the staff of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archeology.

'The lights are burning upstairs,' Diaz said, pointing at the ceiling.

The Pope's apartment was two floors above their heads in the Vatican Palace.

'I suppose that's a good sign,' Aspromonte said. 'Maybe he has made some improvement today.'

'When did you see him last?' Giaccone asked.

'Two days ago. Tomorrow I'll visit again.'

'How did he look?' Diaz asked.

'Weak. Pale. You can see the pain on his face but he'd never complain.' Aspromonte looked at Diaz. 'Come with me tomorrow. I don't have any formal business. I'm sure he'll want to see you.'

Diaz nodded crisply, picked up the glass of Prosecco which Achille had placed by his chair and watched the tiny bubbles rise heavenward.

The pain had been at an ebb for a good hour or more and the Pope was able to take a bowl of thin soup. He had an urge to rise and take advantage of this rare surge of energy. He rang his buzzer and Sister Emilia appeared so quickly that he asked her jokingly if she'd had an ear pressed against his door.

'Get Fathers Diep and Bustamante. Tell them I want to go downstairs to my office and my chapel. And get Giacomo to come and help me get dressed.'

'But, Holiness,' the nun demurred, 'shouldn't we ask Dr Zarilli if this is wise?'

'Leave Zarilli alone,' the Pope growled. 'Let the man have dinner with his family.'

Giacomo Barone was a layman who had been in the Pope's employ for twenty years. He was unmarried, lived in a small room in the Palace and seemed to have no interests beyond football and the pontiff. He spoke when spoken to and when the Pope was deep in thought and disinclined to chat idly they might spend half an hour in silence as they worked through ablutions and robing.

Giacomo came in with a heavy stubble on his face. He smelled of the onions that he'd been cooking.

'I want to wash and get dressed,' the Pope told him.

Giacomo bowed his head obediently and asked, 'What do you want to wear, Holiness?'

'Just house dress. Then take me downstairs.'

Giacomo had powerful arms and shoulders and moved the Pope around his chamber like a manikin, sponging and powdering, layering garments, finishing with a white cassock with fringed white fascia, a pectoral cross, pliable red slippers and a white *zucchetto* in place of the knitted cap. The act of dressing seemed to tire the pontiff but he insisted on carrying out his wishes. Giacomo lifted him into his wheelchair.

They took an elevator to the second floor where two Swiss Guards in full blue, orange and red-striped regalia stood at their traditional posts outside the Sala dei Gendarmi. They seemed shocked by the presence of the Pope. As Giacomo rolled the wheelchair past, the pontiff waved and blessed them. They made their way through empty official rooms of state to the Pope's private study with its large writing desk, his favored place to work and review papers.

The desk was really a large mahogany table, several meters in length, placed before a bookcase which contained an eclectic mix of official documents, sacred texts, biographies, histories and even a few detective novels.

His two private secretaries, one of them a Vietnamese priest, the other a Sardinian, were waiting at quiet attention with smiles on their young faces.

'I've never seen the two of you so happy to be called to work at night,' the Pope said lightly.

'It's been a great while since we've been able to serve Your Holiness,' Father Diep said in his sing-song Italian.

'Our hearts are full of joy,' Father Bustamante added with touching sincerity.

The Pope sat in his wheelchair and surveyed the piles of papers littering his once-tidy desk. He shook his head. 'Look at this,' he said. 'It's like an unattended garden. The weeds have overtaken the flower beds.'

‘Essential business continues,’ Diep said. ‘Cardinals Aspromonte and Diaz are co-signing the day-to-day papers. Much of what we have here are copies for your review.’

‘Let me use what small abilities I have tonight to tend to one or two vital ecclesiastical issues. You choose what is suitable. Then I want to pray in my chapel before I’m once again confined to bed by Sister Emilia and Dr Zarilli.’

The wine was from Aspromonte’s brother who had a vineyard and regularly sent cases to the Vatican. Aspromonte was known for his liberal pouring habits and for giving away bottles as presents.

‘The Sangiovese is excellent,’ Diaz said, holding up the glass to the light of the chandelier. ‘Compliments to your brother.’

‘Well, 2006 was a marvelous year for him and really for everyone who grows in Tuscany. I’ll send you a case if you like.’

‘That would be grand – thank you,’ Diaz said. ‘Let’s pray that conditions are favorable for him this year.’

‘The rains have to stop first,’ Giaccone grumbled. ‘Today’s been mostly clear but, dear God, the last three weeks have been biblical. We should be building an ark!’

‘Is it affecting your work?’ Aspromonte asked.

‘I just came from a meeting of the Pontifical Commission and I can tell you that the archeologists and engineers are worried about the integrity of the catacombs on the Via Antica Appia, particularly St Sebastiano and St Callixtus. The fields above them are so saturated that some trees were uprooted by wind gusts. There’s fear of sinkholes or collapses.’

Diaz shook his head and put down his fork. ‘If only that was all we had to worry about.’

‘The Holy Father,’ Aspromonte said quietly.

Diaz said soberly, ‘Many are looking for us to be doing the right things, to be making preparations.’

'You mean planning for a Conclave,' Giaccone said bluntly.

Diaz nodded. 'The logistics aren't trivial. You can't just snap your fingers and assemble all the Cardinal Electors.'

'Don't you think we have to tread lightly here?' Aspromonte asked, chewing the last of a mouthful of beef. 'The Pope is alive and, God willing, he will remain so. And we must be mindful not to appear to have any personal aspirations.'

Diaz finished his glass and let Aspromonte fill it again. He looked over his shoulder to make sure they were alone. 'We're friends. We've worked shoulder to shoulder for the better part of three decades. We've taken each other's confessions. If we can't talk frankly, who can? We all know the chances are good that the next Pope is sitting at this table. And, in my opinion, I'm too old. And not Italian enough!'

Aspromonte and Giaccone looked down at their plates. 'Someone had to say it,' Diaz insisted.

'Some say it's time for an African or a South American. There are some good men who bear consideration,' Giaccone said.

Aspromonte shrugged. 'I'm told we have some excellent peach gelato for dessert.'

The Pope was alone in his private chapel. Father Diep had wheeled him in and placed him in front of his usual bronze-clad meditation chair. The ceiling glowed with stained-glass backlit panels, contemporary in style, heavy in primary colors. The floor was white Italian marble with black streaks, also a modernist pattern, but softened by a lovely old brown rug in the center. The altar was simple and elegant: a white lace-covered table holding candles and a Bible. Behind the table a golden crucified Christ floated in the concavity of a floor-to-ceiling installation of red marble.

The pontiff's hip started aching and the pain intensified. He had begun to pray and didn't want to return to his sickbed just now. His infusion pump of morphine was fixed to a pole on the wheelchair but he was especially loath to medicate himself in the presence of this beautiful representation of a suffering Christ.

He fought the pain and kept the prayers flowing wordlessly for only God to hear.

Suddenly, a different pain.

It seized his throat and upper chest.

The Pope looked down with the irrational thought that someone had sneaked up and was pressing heavily on his chest.

The pressure made him contort his face and close his eyes.

But he wanted to keep them open and fought to do so.

It was as if a flaming arrow had pierced his breast, burning through layers of flesh.

He couldn't call out, couldn't take a good breath.

He struggled to keep his gaze fixed firmly on the face of the golden Christ.

*Dear God. Help me in my hour of need.*

Monsignor Albano entered Cardinal Aspromonte's dining room without knocking.

Aspromonte could tell from his drained face that something was amiss.

'The Pope! He's been stricken in his chapel!'

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The three cardinals rushed up the stairs and hurried through the formal rooms until they entered the chapel. Fathers Diep and Bustamante had moved the Pope's slumped body from the wheelchair onto the rug and Zarilli was kneeling over his one and only patient.