



AN ANCIENT PARCHMENT.
A DEVASTATING CONSPIRACY.
ONE CHANCE TO EXPOSE IT.

THE LOST TESTAMENT

Bestselling author of *THE FIRST APOSTLE*

JAMES BECKER

About the Book

For thousands of years we guarded it. But now it has been found. This could be the end - for us; for our organisation; for the world. You must destroy it, and those who have taken it.

An ancient object is discovered in a Cairo souk. Hours later, the market trader who sold it is tortured to death. As the bodies begin to pile up, a request for help is sent to British Museum historian Angela Lewis.

Angela travels to Spain with her ex-husband, undercover police officer Chris Bronson. There they discover the key to the greatest secret in the history of Christianity.

Their only problem is deciphering it before they are brutally murdered like those before them . . .

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THE LOST TESTAMENT

James Becker

To Sally, as always

This book is a work of fiction, but several of the incidents described are founded on real events, including the robbery that acts as the catalyst for the story. The criminal organization described is also real, and the revelation at the end has its basis in the historical record.

Prologue

Byzantium AD 325

‘Bring him forward.’

Two trusted soldiers from the emperor’s personal bodyguard saluted their master, then turned and strode out of the temporary council chamber, each step they took accompanied by the metallic clattering of their armour and weapons.

Moments later, the two soldiers reappeared, a nervous-looking civilian now walking between them. They continued to the very end of the chamber, where Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus, accepted only the previous September as the fifty-seventh Emperor of the entire Roman Empire, sat flanked by a coterie of advisors.

‘So, Flavius, what did you discover?’ the emperor asked.

The civilian looked even more nervous at that moment, and Constantine had a sudden realization that he wasn’t simply overawed by being in the presence of the most powerful man in the world. Flavius had been in his employ for years, and had spoken with him countless times. There had to be something else that was disturbing him, and if Flavius was worried, then that was a real cause for concern.

Before the man could speak, Constantine raised his hand, demanding silence, then glanced at his advisors.

‘This is a private matter,’ he said. ‘Kindly leave us.’

Without a word, the half a dozen or so officials standing on both sides of the throne filed out of the chamber, followed by the servants and other retainers stationed elsewhere in the room. Constantine then instructed the two soldiers to

retire to the opposite end of the chamber, out of earshot, but ordered the guard commander, the officer in charge of his personal bodyguard, to remain close beside him. Constantine was far too cautious a man to allow himself to be left entirely alone with anyone, no matter how apparently trustworthy and loyal, and Marcellus had proved his loyalty beyond doubt on numerous occasions.

‘It is not as we had hoped, Our Lord,’ Flavius began. ‘I have seen the original document, and the claims made in it are powerful and very damaging.’

Constantine gestured, and the guard commander stepped forward, took the document Flavius was offering and handed it to his master. The emperor unrolled the parchment and read the Latin text written on it. Then he read it again.

Constantine was not a scholar, but he had no doubt of the authenticity of what he was holding. The report he had just read was, he was quite certain, both authentic and accurate. And that posed a major problem for him, and for his empire.

‘Where did you find this?’ he asked.

‘It was in Rome,’ the man replied. ‘I walked into the archives and searched through the documentation relating to Cohors I Sagittariorum until I found it. Then I brought it to you.’

For perhaps two minutes the emperor remained silent, staring at the parchment in his hand, reading and rereading the words, his acute political mind pondering the direct implications of the document, and how best to use it to his own advantage. From the first, he’d realized that the matter he’d sent Flavius to investigate posed an indirect – but still a potent – threat to him, and would call his leadership and political judgement into serious question if it ever came to light. But it was also clear that without the document he had just been handed there was no direct proof of certain statements made by a notorious troublemaker almost one

and a half centuries earlier. He held the key to the matter – held the single surviving item of undeniable proof without which the story was nothing more than an unsupported allegation in his own hands. And the only other person who knew anything about it was Flavius himself.

In fact, Constantine suddenly realized, the document was less of a threat to him than a potent weapon he could use to his own advantage. He was starting to distrust the ambitions of the leader of an emerging religious movement that was beginning to spread its influence across the empire. But he could bring that group to heel any time he chose, simply by threatening to reveal what this document stated.

And that left only one other matter to be taken care of; and the emperor had made his preparations for this step as well.

Constantine gestured to the guard commander, who took a couple of steps forward and then stood waiting, his right hand resting on the hilt of his *gladius*. Behind Flavius, the two other soldiers of the bodyguard strode swiftly into position, standing a few feet behind the civilian.

‘I thank you for your diligent efforts on my behalf, Flavius, in this matter as in many others over the years,’ Constantine said, ‘and I apologize for the necessity of what I now have to do.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Flavius stared at the emperor, the truth dawning and a look of fear spreading across his face.

With another gesture, the two soldiers stepped forward, seized Flavius by the arms and held him firmly in place.

‘I dare not risk anything of this matter becoming known. I know you would not willingly divulge what you have learned, but I cannot take any chances. I’m sorry, but this has to end now, my old friend. I bid you farewell.’

‘No, no, Our Lord, I beg of you. Please, not this.’

Constantine ignored Flavius’s agonized pleas and turned to the guard commander.

‘One blow, so he doesn’t suffer.’

Marcellus nodded, drew his sword and stepped directly in front of Flavius.

‘Keep a firm grip on his arms,’ he ordered, as the doomed man struggled ineffectually in the steady grasp of the two soldiers.

The guard commander drew back his right arm and with a single and massively powerful blow drove his sword right through Flavius’s body, the pommel slamming into the man’s ribs as the point of the blade burst out of his back in a spray of blood.

For a second or two, Flavius just stared ahead, his eyes wide, his mouth open in a soundless scream of unbearable agony. Then a gout of blood poured out of his mouth and his head fell forward.

Marcellus let go of his weapon and stepped back.

‘Drop him there,’ he ordered, and the two soldiers lowered the limp body of the dead man to the stone floor of the chamber.

Then Marcellus took a dagger from inside his tunic and handed it to one of the soldiers.

‘Cut me,’ he ordered, ‘in my left shoulder. Twice. Not too deep.’

Obediently, the soldier ran the lethally sharp blade across Marcellus’s left upper arm, making two cuts that immediately started to bleed copiously. The man didn’t even flinch.

‘Now drop the dagger beside him,’ he went on, and then turned around to face Constantine.

‘As you ordered, Our Lord,’ he said.

‘Excellent,’ the emperor purred. ‘Now summon help.’

When the other soldiers and advisors ran back into the council chamber, the scene spoke for itself. The treacherous Flavius, so long a trusted emissary of the emperor, had suddenly changed his allegiance and drawn a dagger to make a cowardly attack upon the ruler of the empire. An

attack barely foiled by the selfless heroism of Marcellus, himself badly injured in the assault.

As the bloody body of the 'traitor' was dragged out of the room, and Constantine was congratulated on his lucky escape from death, nobody thought to ask what had become of the parchment Flavius had been carrying when he had entered the chamber.

That was the first time in over three hundred years that blood had been spilled because of that single sheet of parchment, but it was destined not to be the last.

1

Vatican City, Italy 25 November 1965

‘Stop! I heard something.’

Instantly both figures froze into immobility beside the wall. They could almost have been twins, though they were unrelated, both slimly built men of a little below average height, wearing black close-fitting clothing and dark-coloured climbing shoes. Even their hair was black, and they had the typically swarthy complexion of people who live around the Mediterranean.

Neither man had begun his working life as a professional thief. They had both worked as members of an acrobatic troupe in a travelling circus, honing their climbing skills to a high degree of perfection. But after retiring they’d quickly acquired a reputation in certain circles in Italy: these men could be relied upon to get into the most heavily protected of buildings, complete the job they had been hired to do, and keep their mouths shut afterwards.

And that was precisely why they were then in the midst of the Vatican City, carrying out perhaps the most dangerous commission they had ever been given.

For a minute, the men remained immobile, two dark and silent shadows against the light-coloured stone of the wall, listening intently. Then Stefan took a half step closer to his companion and murmured in his ear.

‘What did you hear?’

‘It sounded like a stone falling, something like that. Are you sure there are only two guards on duty tonight?’

‘That’s what we’ve been told: one two-man patrol, nothing more; and they should be a long way from where we are right now. I’ve checked the patrol route, and the gardens are not a high priority.’

‘I hope you’re right. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. Let’s go.’

Dragan grinned at him, his teeth a white slash in the darkness. Then he opened the black fabric rucksack at his feet, extracted a metal grappling hook, the points and shaft coated in thick rubber to muffle any noise, and seized the rope about two feet from the end where it was attached to the hook. He whirled the hook in a circle half a dozen times, then released it. Both men watched critically as the hook sailed up into the air and then vanished over the top of the wall. There was a muffled clunk as the hook came to rest somewhere out of sight.

Cautiously, Dragan reeled it in, pulling the rope towards him and down the wall hand over fist. Suddenly the rope went taut, and he took a step backwards and peered up towards the top of the wall.

‘I think I can see it,’ he whispered. ‘Just check it out, will you?’

Stefan reached into his pocket and took out a small but powerful torch, black tape placed in a criss-cross pattern over the lens to cut down the amount of light that would be emitted. When he switched it on the narrow beam clearly showed two of the four hooks jutting out over the top of the wall.

‘That looks secure to me,’ he said quietly. ‘Do you want to go first?’

‘Yes.’

Dragan picked up his rucksack, closed the flap and slung it over his shoulders. Then he seized the rope with both hands and climbed up it with as little difficulty as if he’d been ascending a flight of stairs. At the top of the wall, he

paused for a moment to check the positioning of the grappling hook, then gestured for his companion to join him.

Moments later, both men were in position, sitting astride the wall as they repositioned the hook so that they could descend into the gardens that stretched out before them. Once they were down at ground level again, this time on the inside, Dragan flicked the rope expertly to dislodge it. The rope represented their escape route, and they dare not leave it in position in case the roving patrol passed by the wall and noticed it dangling there. As soon as the hook fell to the ground, he picked it up, coiled the rope and replaced it in his rucksack.

‘That was the easy bit,’ he said. ‘Now we have to do a bit of proper climbing.’

Neither man had set foot inside the Vatican before, but they moved with unerring certainty. Both of them had spent the previous two weeks studying detailed plans of the Holy See, and they now knew their way around with as much familiarity as if they’d been regular visitors.

Their objective was the Apostolic Library, located off the Belvedere Courtyard underneath the Apostolic Palace, the Pope’s official residence. The library had been founded in 1420 by Pope Nicholas V with an initial endowment of some nine thousand books, but was later incorporated into the Vatican Museum and by 1965 it contained more than a quarter of a million volumes.

The two men couldn’t enter the building at ground level – that would be impossible to do undetected – so they would be taking a very different route to get inside. The Stradone dei Giardini runs along the side of the Belvedere Courtyard, between the line of linked buildings and the gardens to the west, and that would be where they would make their entrance. A couple of minutes later the two men stopped near the Fountain of the Sacrament to make absolutely sure they were unobserved before they crossed over to the side of the building.

'I don't see or hear anything.'

'Neither do I. Let's go.'

The two dark shapes, deeper black shadows in the blackness of the night, flitted silently across the roadway, then crouched down beside the wall of the building, again checking in all directions. The next few minutes would be the most crucial of the entire operation, and if they were spotted neither man was in any doubt about what would happen to them.

'Still clear,' Stefan said.

Dragan nodded, and then both men took a step back and stared upwards at the vertical wall that formed one side of the building. Ten feet away from where they were standing, a water pipe ran all the way down the wall from the gutters at the edge of the roof high above them. The pipe was in excellent condition - the Vatican, as one of the richest organizations in the world, didn't stint on the maintenance costs of its buildings - and within seconds the dark shape of one of the two men, a coil of rope looped around his shoulders, was already a dozen feet off the ground and climbing swiftly up towards the roof.

They didn't need to climb all the way up. Near the top of the building, a balcony beckoned, though it was a few metres from where the water pipe ran down the wall. But just below the balcony was a narrow ledge, barely wide enough for a human foot, and that would provide the means of access they needed.

When he got almost opposite the balcony, about thirty feet above the ground, Dragan stopped to catch his breath - he wasn't as young, or as fit, as he used to be - locking his hands around the back of the water pipe while his climbing shoes rested on one of the junctions. Then he stretched out his right foot, the thin sole allowing him to test his foothold on the ledge before he trusted it with his full weight.

It felt solid, and after a couple of seconds he released his grip on the pipe and flattened himself against the wall as he

began edging his way along the ledge. When he neared the balcony, he reached up, stretching as high as he could go, until his hand closed around the carved stone that formed the top of the wall around it. He took a firm grip, then pulled himself up and onto the balcony itself.

Moments later, he lowered the climbing rope he'd been carrying and waited while his companion attached their two rucksacks to the end of it. Then he hauled it up to the balcony and waited a couple of minutes for Stefan to follow in his footsteps and climb up the pipe.

At the back of the balcony was a set of double doors flanked by two windows, all of which were locked, a fact that surprised neither man. They had expected no less, but glass is fragile, and once they were satisfied that the roving patrol they'd been told about was nowhere in sight, the curved end of a crowbar swiftly disposed of one of the panes of glass in the door, and within a minute both men were standing inside the building, the door closed again behind them.

'This way.'

They walked cautiously out of the chamber accessed by the balcony and stood for a moment in the passageway outside, where a single dim light was burning. It provided just enough illumination for them both to study the plan they had been given. Then they moved on, heading for one very specific part of the building.

'The Sistine Hall,' Dragan murmured a few minutes later, pointing at the sign beside the doorway. 'That's it.'

None of the interior doors in the building appeared to be locked, the staff presumably believing that the external doors offered sufficient deterrent to thieves, and as soon as both men were inside the room, they split up and began their search.

By any standards, they were surrounded by treasures: glass cases containing ancient manuscripts and other relics, intermittently illuminated by the narrow beams of their

torches. In one case lay an enormously valuable fifth-century New Testament written in Greek. In another, documents signed by Martin Luther. In yet others were a collection of love letters sent by King Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, an essay written by Galileo to the Cardinal who later became Pope Urban VIII, a letter from the painter Raphael, and another letter, this one sent by Michelangelo to the Superintendent of St Peter's. But they barely glanced at any of these priceless exhibits. They were looking for two very specific objects, and in a couple of minutes they had found them both.

'Over here.'

The two men stood side by side looking down at one particular case.

'That's it?' Stefan said, comparing what was written on the sheet of paper in his hand with what they were looking at inside the glass case.

'Yes,' his companion agreed. 'In fact, that's both of them.'

The glass on the locked display case wasn't armoured in any way and offered no more resistance to the crowbar than the pane of glass on the balcony door.

'These other old books and stuff have got to be worth something.'

'More than you or I could ever earn in a dozen lifetimes,' Dragan said, 'but you know the way we work. We do what we're paid to do and nothing else.' He opened up the neck of his rucksack while his companion lifted out the two objects they had been told to steal, and laid them carefully inside it.

As they walked down the corridor between the Hall and the Borgia Apartment the younger thief grabbed the other's sleeve and gestured towards a glass case.

'Look at this,' he whispered. 'It's gold, a crown of gold.'

'Yes, but—'

Before he could finish his sentence, Stefan had already lifted his crowbar and cracked the glass that covered the

ancient relic.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Look, I know what you said, and you’re right. But this is gold. We can have it melted down, so it’ll be untraceable. We’re only ever going to get an opportunity like this once.’

Without waiting for a reply, Stefan plucked the gold crown out of the shattered display case and placed it in his rucksack. Almost as an afterthought, he also picked up a small and highly decorated copper and enamel box and took that as well.

‘Put those on now, and don’t take them off until I tell you.’

The order was unsurprising. They had encountered their employer only twice before, and each time they had been blindfolded and driven some way outside Rome to a large and clearly expensive villa, and the entire time they’d been in the building the man himself had been out of sight behind a screen, so they had no idea who he was, except that he probably wasn’t Italian, because his instructions had been relayed through an interpreter.

This time, the journey to the villa took about forty minutes and, after removing their hoods, they were led through to the same room they had been in previously. There, an arrangement of screens had been placed at one end, and a table positioned more or less in the centre of the room, the man they believed to be an interpreter standing beside it.

‘Do you have them?’ the man asked.

By way of answer, Stefan opened his rucksack, lifted out the two objects they had been told to steal and placed them on the table.

The interpreter smiled for the first time since they had seen him.

‘Excellent,’ he purred. ‘You have done well. Now leave the room while my employer inspects these two relics.’

Stefan reached out his hand to pick up the rucksack, but the interpreter shook his head.

‘You can leave that here. My employer will not take long.’

The two men glanced at each other, then shrugged and left the room as they’d been told. They had no option but to comply: the presence of two tall and heavily built men standing by the door ensured that. They were ushered into a small anteroom by one of these two guards, who then took up a position in the open doorway.

But the interpreter had been right. Less than ten minutes after they’d been told to leave, the two men were called back inside the room. The scene appeared to be exactly as it had been when they’d left, albeit with three small changes: in addition to the two literary manuscripts they’d been told to steal, the golden crown and the enamel box were also placed on the table – their rucksacks had clearly been searched – as well as a single piece of brown parchment.

The interpreter stared at the two men in a disapproving fashion.

‘The instructions we gave you, the most specific instructions issued by my employer, were extremely simple. He wished you to steal these two manuscripts’ – he pointed at the two leather-bound objects on the table – ‘the work of the Italian poets Petrarch and Torquato Tasso, and nothing else. Yet you apparently saw fit to take this crown and box of mementos too. Why was that?’

For a moment, neither man replied. Then Dragan took a half step forward and pointed at the crown.

‘It was my decision,’ he said. ‘It was obvious that the theft would be discovered almost immediately, and I thought it might help to muddy the waters slightly if we picked up another couple of items from the library while we were there, to disguise the real objective of the robbery.’

That was nothing like what had actually happened, but as a spur-of-the-moment improvisation, he thought it was quite inventive, and almost believable.

The interpreter stared across the table, his eyes moving from one man to the other, then he nodded, turned and disappeared behind the screens at the far end of the room. The sound of muffled voices could be heard. After about half a minute, he returned.

‘We applaud your quick thinking, though my employer does not believe you for a moment. You took the other two objects, intending to keep them for yourselves. However, that is not important because you did recover what you were paid to find. Now we have one other question for you.’ The interpreter pointed at the single sheet of parchment lying by itself on the table. ‘What is that?’ he asked.

The two men stared at the object.

‘I’ve no idea,’ Dragan replied. ‘I’ve never seen it before. We picked up the two sets of manuscripts from the display case and took nothing else from that room.’

‘That was at the back of the Tasso collection, but it is obviously not a part of it.’

Dragan shrugged. ‘Sorry, I’ve no idea.’

‘Very well. You have already received half of the agreed fee, and later today we will pay you the remainder, once you have completed one further task for us.’

‘That was not a part of our arrangement,’ Dragan replied. ‘We were to carry out the theft, deliver the goods to you and then we were to be paid.’

‘But you’ve already broken your part of the agreement by stealing these two other items. My employer is a fair man, and he has agreed you may retain the enamel box and the additional sheet of parchment and try to sell them if you wish. Call it a bonus. And the additional task we want you to perform is very, very simple, but we will be watching you to make sure that you complete it exactly as we order. You are to take the crown and the two manuscripts, place them in a secure metal container we will provide and then throw them away at the precise time and place that we tell you.’

‘What? I don’t understand.’

'You don't need to. You just need to do what we ask.'

Five days later, the man who had organized and paid for the apparently pointless burglary in the Vatican left Italy in his chauffeur-driven car. Hidden in a secret pocket in one of his sets of matching suitcases were the two original manuscripts, handwritten by Petrarch and Tasso, which he would store securely in his extensive collection of ancient relics as soon as he got back home.

In the meantime, from what he'd been able to gather from the newspaper reports in Italy, Vatican officials appeared quite satisfied that the first-class forgeries he'd commissioned the previous year were actually the real thing, dumped by amateur burglars who got cold feet. All in all, and despite the somewhat unexpected greed of the two burglars he'd employed, it had been one of his most successful collecting expeditions.

2

Vatican City, Rome **14 April 2010**

Adolfo Gianni was dying, and he knew it.

The doctor's diagnosis of terminal cancer of the lungs had not been entirely unexpected. He'd been coughing for years, and recently his chronic shortage of breath had got significantly worse. He'd put it down to old age, to the body simply getting less able to cope with the rigours of day-to-day life, but when he'd noticed blood on his handkerchief after one particularly violent bout of coughing, he'd guessed the worst.

He remembered the consultation a few days later very clearly. When he'd heard the diagnosis, he'd immediately remarked to the doctor that it was extremely unfair.

'I've never smoked a cigarette in my life,' Gianni had said, his voice resigned and flat, 'or even associated with people who enjoy an addiction to tobacco.'

'That's probably the commonest cause of lung cancer,' the doctor had replied, 'but there could be a number of other reasons for the disease taking hold. Several chemicals and foods have been identified as possible carcinogens, and some recent research has even suggested that burnt diesel fuel could also be a cause. And Rome traffic has always been heavy. Your illness may simply be a product of your environment, nothing more.'

'What about treatment?' Gianni had asked.

The suddenly grave expression on the doctor's face would, the old cleric knew, remain etched on his memory

until the very end, which he guessed would be rather sooner than he had hoped.

‘I am terribly sorry to have to tell you that there really is almost nothing we can do for you. You are not in the best of health generally, quite apart from the cancer, and at your age I don’t believe that an operation would be possible or advisable. And,’ the doctor had continued, ‘even if such a surgical procedure could be performed, I have little hope that doing so would achieve very much. As far as I can tell, the cancer is simply too far advanced for that. We can, of course, control the pain you will soon start to experience but, to be perfectly frank with you, that is about all we can do.’

For a few moments Gianni hadn’t responded, his brain reluctantly processing the quietly clinical death sentence that had just been pronounced. And then he had asked the inevitable question.

‘How long have I got left?’

Again the doctor’s face had clouded.

‘I can only give you my best guess. Perhaps six months, perhaps less. Perhaps a lot less. It will all depend upon how aggressive the cancer is, on how quickly it invades all the tissues of your lungs. The truth is that I really don’t know, and I’m certain that no doctor would be able to give you a definitive answer. But at least I’m sure that you will have ample time to make your peace with God.’

Gianni had smiled slightly at that.

‘I made my peace with God a very long time ago,’ he had replied, ‘though I still have one more task I must complete before the end.’

Actually, the doctor had been somewhat optimistic. Within six weeks Gianni had been forced to take to his bed in his tiny room in the Vatican City, a bed that he knew he would never again leave.

And now, as he slipped in and out of consciousness while the opiates did their work and eased the burning in his

chest, reducing it to a dull but persistent ache, he guessed that the end was near. But he still had one more duty to discharge before he finally stood before his maker.

Adolfo Gianni waved away the nun who had been adjusting the flow of painkilling drugs through the intravenous line attached to his left arm, and gestured feebly to the other man, a slim and dark-haired young priest wearing rimless spectacles, who was standing uncomfortably against the wall of the room, mounting the death watch.

‘Yes, Father,’ the man murmured, stepping forward immediately and looking down at the frail, thin-faced man, his head outlined by a virtual halo of white hair, who lay on the bed, his body markedly and almost daily diminished by the disease which was steadily killing him. ‘Do you wish me to administer the *Viaticum* now?’

Despite the pain in his chest, a clutching tightness that made breathing difficult and any kind of strenuous movement completely impossible, Gianni summoned a weak smile from somewhere.

‘Not quite yet, Francis. I can delay the last rites for a little while longer, I believe. No, I must see Father Morini.’

3

Until his terminal illness had forced him to cease work within the Vatican, Adolfo Gianni had been the Prefect in charge of the Secret Archives, and of the staff of priests appointed to work there. The archives weren't a collection of dusty books and manuscripts ranged on shelves in a darkened room, but were bright and busy most of the time, people coming and going throughout the hours of daylight, and often late into the evening as well.

When it became clear that Father Gianni would not be able to continue with his work, another very senior cleric, Father Antonio Morini, had been appointed in his place, and had been spending most of his time in the archive ever since, improving his knowledge of the way the system worked and familiarizing himself with his new employment. Francis Gregory knew exactly where he would find his new superior.

He knocked twice on the Prefect's door, waited a few seconds, then opened it and stepped into the office.

The man sitting behind the desk was heavily built, his broad shoulders straining at the fabric of his habit, with a ruddy, round face, topped by a thatch of greying hair. He looked more like a farmer than a senior Vatican official.

Morini looked up as the young man entered his office and gave him a slight sad smile.

'Has he finally slipped away?' he asked.

Gregory shook his head.

'Not yet, Father, but I think the end is very near. I offered him the *Viaticum*, but he declined, at least for the moment.

Instead, he asked me - in fact, he told me - to summon you to his bedside.'

'Perhaps he wants me to personally administer the last rites to him?' Morini wondered.

Again Gregory shook his head.

'Possibly, but I think it's something else, something that he wants to talk to you about.'

Morini nodded, glanced at the papers covering the desk in front of him, and then stood up.

'I could do without the interruption, but of course in these sad circumstances I will speak with Father Gianni if that is his wish.'

Morini closed and then locked the door of his office - some of the documents he had been studying were fairly sensitive and, even within the Vatican, curious eyes were to be discouraged - and the two clerics strode away down the corridor.

A few minutes later, Gregory opened the door to Gianni's room and stood to one side as Father Morini stepped into the chamber. The dying cleric's eyes were closed and he did not appear to have moved, but Gregory noticed that there were flecks of blood around his mouth that had not been there before. The medically trained nun was still in attendance, and as they entered she was again altering the dosage of the opiates the old man was receiving. Seeing Morini, she dipped her head in respectful salute and retreated to sit on a chair in one corner.

Morini crossed the short distance to the head of the single bed and looked down. He reached out and took hold of Gianni's right hand and applied gentle pressure.

The dying man opened his eyes and looked up, summoning a weak smile.

'Thank you for coming, Antonio,' he said.

Then he glanced around the room and noticed the two other people in attendance there. He gestured to Morini to bend forward slightly and murmured into his ear.

'You must be my confessor, Antonio, and what I have to tell you is for your ears alone,' he muttered. 'Please ask the others to leave the room.'

Morini nodded. Like every other Roman Catholic priest, he fully appreciated the sanctity of the confessional.

'The Father would like me to take his confession,' he said, turning to Gregory. 'Can you and the Sister please give us a few minutes alone?'

When the door closed behind Gregory and the nun, Morini again turned to face the old man, and knelt down beside the bed so that his head was as close as possible to Gianni's.

'We are quite alone now, my old friend - just you and me and the heavenly Father. I will gladly hear your confession and grant absolution.'

Gianni nodded, the movement of his head barely perceptible.

But what he said next was not at all what Morini had expected.

Gianni clutched the younger man's hand with a grip that was surprisingly firm and began to speak in a low and weak voice.

'I am not confessing my sins, Antonio. I attended to that matter regarding my departure from this world some two weeks ago. I didn't believe I could commit any important sins just by lying here, except perhaps being guilty of sloth.'

Morini smiled at the feeble joke.

'So how can I help you?' he asked.

'What I have to tell you is a confession of sorts, I suppose, but it is far from personal, and involves my professional position here in the Vatican hierarchy, a position that you now occupy. I have some important information to impart to you, and you must solemnly swear never to share what I have to say with anyone else, inside or outside the Vatican.'

Gianni sank backwards onto his pillow. The effort of speaking at all was clearly taking its toll on his ravaged body.