



THE
VATICAN
CONSPIRACY

JONATHAN CROSS

THE VATICAN CONSPIRACY

A Novel
by
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Dedicated to all my Good Friends—you know who you are!
JC

PART I

CHAPTER 1

THE VATICAN

Pope Francis lithely entered into the small chapel next to his private quarters. The dark chapel was dimly lit by a row of flickering votive candles that cast a soothing splay of shadows across the ancient altar. The Pope knelt his thin, angular body before it; his white cassock cascaded across the red, soft cushion. He gently entwined the ebony rosary beads between his fingers, crossed himself in the supplicant tradition, and kissed the crucifix as he closed his eyes and began to recite out loud the Five Holy Mysteries of the Rosary.

His nightly reverie, before bed, calmed him and connected his soul to the sublime obedience of God. During these moments of prayer, he put the chaos of his Office into perspective: the business of running the Vatican, the spiritual responsibility of guiding over one billion Catholics in the area of faith and morals. This was his time to commune with his own spirituality, to harmonize his soul with the peace of his Father in Heaven.

He rolled the rosary beads, one by one, through his fingers as he chanted the *Ave Maria*. His voice rose into a cadence of a Gregorian chant, the beauty of the alliterated ancient Latin echoed through the chapel like a spiritual sonnet.

As he prayed, a soft, almost imperceptible light began to invade the small shadowy chapel. Oblivious, he continued his chanting recital of the rosary until the light brightened into an intrusive force, causing his eyes to open. Startled, he watched with curious astonishment as a purple mist emanated from the Tabernacle on the altar where the Holy Eucharist was kept. A singular focus began to take shape within the mist—a presence with form and face. An indescribable harmonic rhythm pulsated from an iridescent, glowing white and purple translucent form, which floated above the altar and then started moving toward him.

His heart pounded with both fear and excitement as the ethereal presence shimmered before him. The apparition raised what appeared to be a filmy form of an arm that began to roll toward him like a slow moving ocean wave; it pointed a milky white semblance of a finger directly at his chest and then smoothly entered into Francis' heart.

Transfixed by the face of the purple presence, which seemed neither male nor female, froze his body, mind and spirit into an eternal moment of ecstasy. No words, only the rhythmic pulsing. He saw what he thought to be a smile forming on the face of the unworldly presence, his being filled with a soothing, warm liquid-like feeling as four names were imprinted into his mind.

Throngs of tourists spread out over St Peter's Square like a living quilt. The late morning sun broke through a bank of gray clouds, and rays of sun spotlighted the hills of Rome.

Alfredo, the Pope's personal secretary, knocked once and then entered the Pope's private office. "Your Holiness," Alfredo said, dipping his head in a gesture of respect, "you've got a full schedule today. By the way," his voice rising slightly, "I should warn you that Cardinal Berini is on the warpath again. I heard him shouting up and down the halls that the American Bishops were trying to rewrite Church Doctrine again."

Ignoring Alfredo's concerned warning, "Sit down, Alfredo," the Pope said, removing his glasses and motioning him toward a chair next to his desk, "I want to talk to you."

The Pope's usually robust and eager mood, to which Alfredo had become accustomed, was strangely absent. "Is His Holiness feeling well?" he asked with genuine concern, as he sat down.

"We are fine, Alfredo." The Pope paused and looked out the window, which was slightly ajar, at two white doves sitting on the ledge, cooing. "I have a special request. A quiet

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assignment, Alfredo. Do you know what I mean?” Francis spoke softly as he studied Alfredo.

Alfredo didn't.

For centuries, the word *WE* was always used instead of *I* when referring to the Papacy. After serving three Popes, the use of the word *I* threw Alfredo momentarily, but then he quickly reminded himself that this was the first American Pope in history, and more importantly the first one of Jewish decent, except for maybe the first few, of course. So, if tradition were to be broken it seemed only fitting for Francis, the First, to do it. But Alfredo was puzzled. During the last eight years the Pope had never broken with any Vatican tradition. Why today?

“Is it serious, Your Holiness?” Alfredo asked, as deep furrows formed on his brow.

“No, no. Just personal,” he said, shaking his head.

“Family?”

“No, Alfredo. A personal favor. Nothing to do with family or Church business.”

“Whatever Your Holiness wishes.” Alfredo nodded.

“I want you to do this as...as a friend,” Francis said not quite sure how to ask. “You have served several Popes, and your loyalty has been unique. I know you'll maintain the trust I place in you.”

Alfredo began to feel uneasy. “Of course, Your Holiness.”

“I know how difficult your assignment has been, considering everything.”

Alfredo shrugged in a non-committal way.

Francis began to pace. “The Church has become the order of men, instead of the order of God.”

“Your Holiness,” Alfredo said, sounding like a professor, “Politics has always been part of the history and doctrine of the Church.”

“You're right, of course.”

“Your request, Holy Father?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you, Alfredo.” The Pope pulled a notepad from his drawer, tore off a page and handed it to Alfredo. “Do you know these four names?”

Alfredo studied them for a minute. “A couple of them look familiar, but I can’t be sure.” He started to hand the page back.

“No, keep it. I want you to find out who these men are, or if they even exist.”

The last words startled Alfredo. “You don’t know them then, Your Eminence?”

“See what you can find out. Quietly, Alfredo.”

“Yes, Your Holiness. I will be discreet.”

“Thank you,” Francis sighed. “Now, for today’s agenda,” he said more upbeat.

“Your first Audience is with a group of young Jesuit Priests from Venice. After that...”

As Alfredo read off the day’s business, the Pontiff’s mind drifted off into the strange event of the night before. After experiencing a visitation, worthy only of the mystic saints, he should have felt exhilarated, consumed in a state of reverie. Instead, his mind reeled in confusion, and his heart ached with a foreboding feeling.

When Alfredo left, Francis dressed to meet the young Jesuits.

The Audience began as usual. Each priest was introduced, then knelt in the ritual show of obedience to the Vicar of Christ, and kissed the Ring that represented the power and majesty of the Papal Office. One by one they followed; Francis gave them each, in turn, the Papal Blessing, that was, until he heard the name “Father Antonio Salvi”—the first name that had been imprinted by the strange apparition. The young Jesuit knelt before him. Francis’ heart quickened. “How long have you been a priest, my son?”

Antonio was startled, visiting priests were spoken to only as a group, never individually. He couldn’t help but look up into the eyes of the Pontiff. “Five years, Your Holiness,” he words sputtered out.

“I see... Well, may God bless you in your chosen mission,” Francis said. The word ‘mission’ instantly rang like a bell in his mind, and immediately realized that the apparition had come to deliver a Divine Mission, in which, somehow, this

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young priest was to play an important role. Francis gave him the Papal Blessing while making the Sign of the Cross over his head.

When the Audience ended, Francis quickly asked one of the prelates how long the group would be visiting the Vatican.

“Most of the day, Your Holiness,” he responded. “We’re giving them a complete tour, and then Cardinal Berini has insisted on giving them a private mass.”

Francis knew it would be more a liturgical lecture than a Pastoral message. “Find Father Alfredo immediately, and have him come to my office.”

The prelate nodded and moved away swiftly.

Eight years before, when the College of Cardinals had elected him Pope, Joseph Cardinal McCully had taken the name of Francis, the First, out of respect for St. Francis, the Founder of his order, the Franciscans.

He had been the last Cardinal appointed just prior to the previous Pope’s death. The chance of him being a potential Successor was unimaginable. Not only because he had been newly appointed, but primarily because he was an American Cardinal, and the mood in the Vatican was to return the Papacy to an Italian. Cardinal Berini was the most obvious choice; he had lobbied, subtly and not so subtly, the most influential Cardinals.

However, after the white smoke rose from the chimney announcing the election of a new Pope, the word spread like wild fire through the mass of people, who had been waiting patiently in the Square, that the newly elected Pope was an unknown American Cardinal; the mostly Italian crowd stared at each other in disbelief.

Later, when the other Cardinals were asked by Berini concerning the voting, ironically, almost all of them were fuzzy about the actual voting. The next day the Italian newspapers ran bold headlines declaring the end of the Catholic Church

as the world knew it. Cardinal Berini was furious, and made it known to everyone, including the new Pope.

When it was later discovered that Pope Francis was not only a recently appointed American Cardinal, but that he was of Jewish descent, and had been adopted by Catholic parents, the Lira dropped, the Italian Stock Market almost collapsed, and Cardinal Berini actually had a mild heart attack.

But during the intervening years, Pope Francis, the First, had become one of the most effective spiritual spokesmen of the last century. It was he who had found the solution to the Balkan crisis, and personally mediated a comprehensive peace agreement, which amazingly enough had held, and in spite of the skepticism had been getting stronger over the last five years.

Pope Francis, with his magnetic personality and his inclusive religious pronouncements, had inspired and activated a dormant spiritual power within the individual, regardless of their religious Faith. In the beginning, many had called him the Anti-Christ, but now most of his detractors fell silent. He had proven himself as a true religious leader, that is, except, to Berini who yearned for the good old days of the Infallible Papacy.

Pope Francis paced in a circle studying the names he had written down. The first name was Antonio Salvi. He had written the names down immediately after the visitation in the exact order that they had appeared in his mind. He believed the names were given to him in a certain order for a specific reason. But what was the reason? Perhaps, after talking with Father Salvi he would have a better idea as to the significance of the order of the names.

After the customary knock, Father Alfredo walked, exuberantly, into the room. "Your Holiness..."

"Ah, Alfredo." Francis interrupted him with his own excitement. "I have met the first name on the list. He's a young

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Jesuit from Venice. He was part of the Audience this morning. I want you to find him and bring him here, quickly and quietly, Alfredo. I do not want anyone to know of this meeting, especially, Berini.”

“I will bring him immediately, Holy Father. Also, I believe I know two of the other names on the list,” Alfredo said, sharing the Pope’s excitement.

“Good. Who are they?”

“If I’m right...” he paused for minute and then frowned. “Holy Father, you may not like the man who belongs to this name. He is Angelo Gallucci, Capo di Capo of the Italian Mafia. He possesses the name of an angel, but he does the work of the devil,” Alfredo said, crossing himself.

Francis offered no outward reaction. “He’s the third name on the list, Alfredo.”

“Yes, Holy Father. I thought you would like to know about him first. The second name on the list is Alexander Artemis, a United States Senator. His picture, conveniently enough, was all over the front pages of the morning papers. He’s the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and is due to be here in Rome in a few weeks for a scheduled meeting with the NATO countries. With all the talk of NATO breaking up, the speculation is that he’s bound to be a central figure in the debate.”

“Has he taken a position?”

“He’s a politician, Holy Father,” Alfredo said, screwing his face into a wry grin.

“Anything else about him?”

“Just gossip.”

“Come, come Alfredo,” Francis said impatiently.

“The article said that he might not seek re-election. It seems that his daughter died under questionable circumstances, and he might have had the real cause of her death covered up. But, this is only suspicion, rumor, nothing more. The source is attributed to his political opponent.” Alfredo shrugged his shoulders. “You know politicians, Holy Father, who can be sure.”

The words, ‘death of his daughter’, echoed in Francis’ ears like the sound of the Vatican bells. “Anything about when and how his daughter died?”

“It was unclear, Holy Father. Maybe a year ago.”

“Find Father Salvi, Alfredo.” His voice spiked with urgency.

Alfredo nodded and left. Francis walked to the window and watched a flock of pigeons sail across a gray Italian sky, and thought again about the order of the names he had been given. The order had to be important. The rumor of the Senator’s daughter’s death darted through his mind, and suddenly, the warm, liquid-like feeling he had experienced the night before, filled his chest, and the word “Drugs” were etched into his mind. “Ah,” he said, quizzically to himself, “it seems, I am only to be told a little at a time.” Now, at least, he had a direction. His mind immediately turned to Gallucci. What about Gallucci? Devil or Angel?

Within ten minutes, Father Alfredo knocked on the door and entered into the Pope’s private office with the young Jesuit priest in tow. Father Salvi looked like someone who was being brought to the Principal’s office. Before Alfredo could say a word, the Pope thanked him and raised one eyebrow, which was their private signal for him to leave. The Pope felt it unseemly and demeaning to ask his secretary to leave his Presence when others could hear.

Alfredo bowed and exited quickly through the rustic, door of the Papal office. Father Salvi stood with his hands folded in front of him, feeling alone and very uncomfortable before the premiere Eminence of the Roman Catholic Church, to which he had dedicated his life

The Pope addressed the young priest in Italian. “Father, you look like the fox who ate the chicken.”

“Your Holiness, have I done something wrong?” the young Jesuit asked with a great deal of nervousness. “Father Alfredo,” he said, perplexed, “was quite mysterious. We had

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to wait until the rest of the group moved on, and then we secretly took your private elevator, so that no one would see us coming here.”

Francis answered, “I asked Father Alfredo to bring you here, discreetly. A little melodramatic, perhaps... But, please, come over here and sit down.”

Father Salvi moved with the obedience of a servant and came over to where the Pope was sitting, knelt down next to him, and started to kiss the Ring.

The Pope withdrew his hand. “Once today is enough. Please sit down Father... May I call you Antonio?” he asked.

“Of course, Holy Father,” he replied and sat down in an ancient wooden chair.

“Antonio,” the Pope began with a smile, “tell me about yourself? By the way, you are not in any trouble.”

Antonio relaxed, but only slightly. “Well, Holy Father, I was born in a small town just outside of Palermo...”

Ah, Angelo Gallucci the Pope mused. Palermo, Sicily was the command center of the Mafia.

“...I had a Calling at an early age. My mother believed it was a good idea to have a priest in the family, so I was encouraged.”

“And your father?”

“He thought it might be useful someday. You know how Sicilians are.”

“You don’t have a Sicilian accent.”

“I do when I need it.”

“Do you also speak English?”

“Very well, Holy Father,” Antonio replied in perfect English. “I also speak five other languages fluently,” Antonio said with pride. “And, if I might say, Holy Father, you speak beautiful Italian.”

“For an American?” the Pope quipped in English.

“Forgive me, Holy Father, I meant no disrespect.”

“None taken. Please continue, in English, if you don’t mind?”

“I would like that very much, I need the practice. But, there’s not much more to tell, Holy Father. I entered the

Seminary at seventeen. I had, let's say, an aptitude for learning, so they sent me to Venice where I was ordained after ten years, and have been there ever since."

"What were your studies, aside from what was required?"

"Political Science, Holy Father."

Again things started to take shape. "Why Political Science?"

"You know the Jesuits, they're into everything."

"So, I've been told. But I was referring to why you studied Politics."

"I have had some ambition to work in the Vatican's Foreign Service. Maybe, even apply for a position in one of the Vatican's Embassies somewhere."

"I see. And are you going to apply?"

"It is a difficult process, Holy Father. So much red tape; so many permissions from so many higher ups. Besides, I think they intend to send me back to Sicily."

"How do you know?"

"One of the Monsignors has suggested it."

"Antonio," the Pope paused and looked intently at the handsome young priest, "is your family Mafia?"

Antonio squirmed. "Holy Father, everyone in Sicily has some family in the Mafia."

"Angelo Gallucci," the Pope enunciated the name with precise intention.

"Holy Father, I have done nothing wrong. And I am proud to be a Sicilian," Antonio said defensively.

"Calm yourself Antonio. It was merely a name. Do you know him?" It wasn't merely a name.

"He's my uncle, Holy Father," Antonio said quietly and with great trepidation.

"He's a powerful man. Does he want you back in Palermo?"

"I don't know. I haven't talked to him in many years."

"Do you think the Monsignor's suggestion was coincidence?"

"Not really," he said fidgeting.

The Pope got up and walked over to a wall cabinet and withdrew some papers. "Fill these out. I am sending you on a Papal mission." He handed the papers to Antonio.

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As he read the papers he could hardly contain himself. “These papers are assigning me to the Vatican Embassy in Washington, DC.”

“I am making you a Special Papal Ambassador-at-large. You will report only to me. I will arrange that no one will question anything you do.”

“Holy Father, with all due respect, there will be many questions. What shall I say?”

“You will say you are learning to be a politician. We cannot let your studies go in vain.”

“Your Holiness, I do not understand any of this. First, your questions scared me, now you give me what I have always dreamed of, but never imagined possible. To go to the United States is more than a dream come true.” Antonio fell to his knees. “I am not worthy of this honor, Holy Father.”

Pope Francis picked him up by the shoulders. “None of us are worthy, my son.”

Antonio brushed a tear from his eye. “What do you want me to do, Holy Father?”

“I don’t know yet. You will remain here in the Vatican. Father Alfredo will make the arrangements. Tomorrow you will have your Diplomatic Passport. You are to talk to no one. You’re to answer no questions. Not even to your family. From now on you will make contact with no one without my consent. I assume you take your vow of Obedience seriously,” The Pope said, raising an eyebrow.

“I do Holy Father.”

“Good. Then you will leave for Washington day after tomorrow.”

“What should I do when I get there?”

“Before you leave I will tell you.” The Pope had no better answer. He only hoped that he would have something to tell him.

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