

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* #1 BESTSELLER

# DANIEL SILVA

A GABRIEL ALLON THRILLER

# THE FALLEN ANGEL

'A WORLD-CLASS PRACTITIONER OF SPY FICTION'  
*Washington Post*

*For Louis Toscano, who has been  
there from the beginning. And  
as always, for my wife, Jamie, and  
my children, Lily and Nicholas.*

*I warn you against shedding blood  
indulging in it and making a habit of it  
for blood never sleeps*

SALAD

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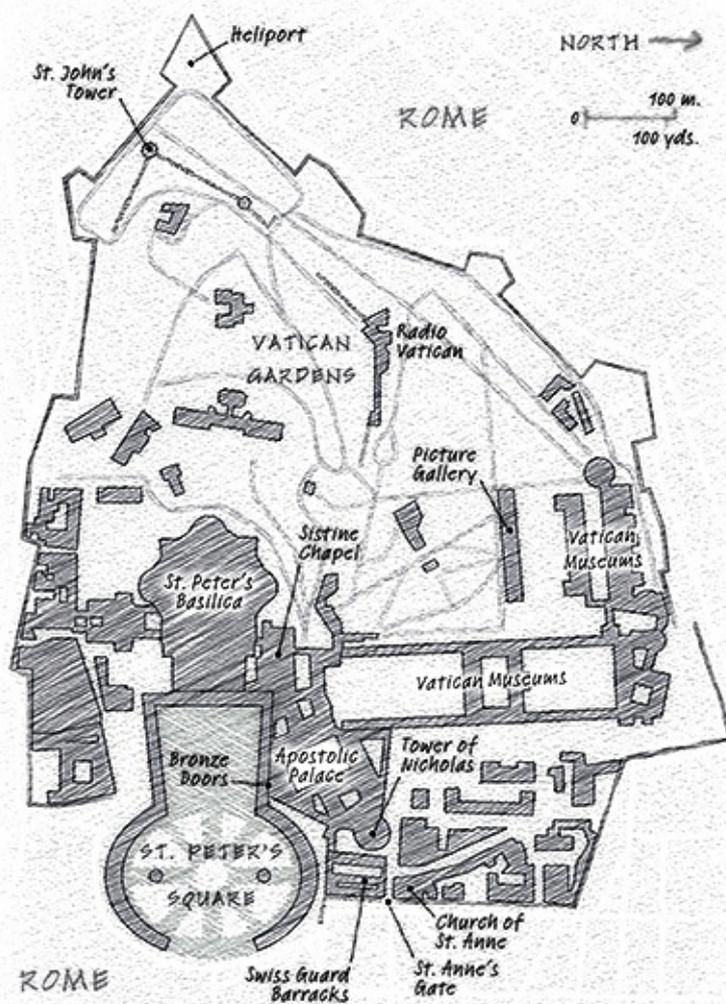
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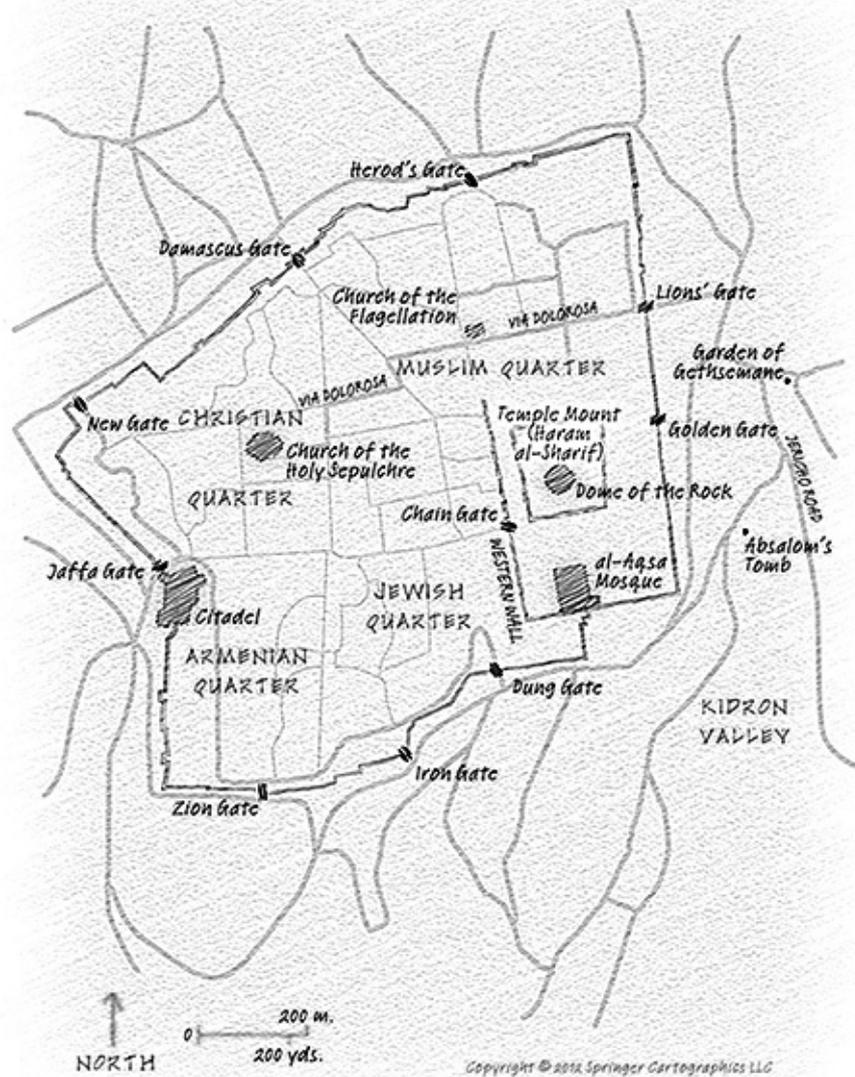
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## VATICAN CITY



# OLD CITY of JERUSALEM



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**CITY OF THE DEA**

IT WAS NICCOLÒ MORETTI, CARETAKER of St. Peter's Basilica, who made the discovery that started it all. The time was 6:24 a.m., but owing to a wholly innocent error of transcription, the Vatican's first official statement incorrectly reported it as 6:42. It was one of numerous missteps, large and small, that would lead many to conclude the Holy See had something to hide, which was indeed the case. The Roman Catholic Church, said a noteworthy dissident, was but one scandal away from oblivion. The last thing His Holiness needed now was a dead body in the sacred heart of Christendom.

A scandal was the last thing Niccolò Moretti had been expecting to find that morning when he arrived at the Vatican one hour earlier than his usual time. Dressed in dark trousers and a knee-length gray coat, he was scarcely visible as he hurried across the darkened piazza toward the steps of the Basilica. Glancing to his right, he saw lights burning in the third-floor windows of the Apostolic Palace. His Holiness Pope Paul VII was already awake. Moretti wondered whether the Holy Father had slept at all. The Vatican was swirling with rumors he was suffering from a crippling bout of insomnia that he spent most nights writing in his private study or walking alone in the gardens. The caretakers had seen it before. Eventually, they all lost the ability to sleep.

Moretti heard voices behind him and, turning, saw a pair of Curial priests materialize from the gloom. They were engaged in animated conversation and paid him no heed as they marched toward the Bronze Doors and melted once more into the shadows. The children of Rome called them *bagarozzi* - black beetles. Moretti had used the word once as a child and had been scolded by none other than Pope Pius XII. He'd never said it since. When one is chastised by the Vicar of Christ, he thought now, one rarely repeats the same offense.

He hiked up the steps of the Basilica and slipped into the portico. Five doors led into the nave. All were sealed except for the one at the far left, the Door of Death. In the opening stood Father Jacobo, an emaciated-looking Mexican cleric with strawlike gray hair. He stepped aside so Moretti could enter, then closed the door and lowered the heavy bar. "I'll come back at seven to let in your men," the priest said. "Be careful up there, Niccolò. You're not as young as you used to be."

The priest withdrew. Moretti dipped his fingers in holy water and made the sign of the cross before setting out up the center of the vast nave. Where others might have paused to gaze in awe, Moretti forged on with the familiarity of a man entering his own home. As chief of the *sampietrini* - the official caretakers of the Basilica, he had been coming to St. Peter's six mornings a week for the past twenty-seven years. It was because of Moretti and his men that the Basilica glowed with heavenly light while the other great churches of Europe seemed forever shrouded in darkness. Moretti considered himself not only a servant of the papacy but a partner in the enterprise. The popes were entrusted with the care of one billion Roman Catholic souls, but it was Niccolò Moretti who looked after the mighty Basilica that symbolized their earthly power. He knew every square inch of the building, from the peak of Michelangelo's dome to the depths of the crypt — all forty-four altars, twenty-seven chapels, eight hundred columns, four hundred statues, and three hundred windows. He knew where it was cracked and where it leaked. He knew when it was feeling well and when it was in pain. The Basilica, when it spoke, whispered into the ear of Niccolò Moretti.

St. Peter's had a way of shrinking mere mortals, and Moretti, as he made his way toward the Papal Altar in the gray coat of his uniform, looked remarkably like a thimble come to life. He genuflected before the Confessio and then tilted his face skyward. Soaring nearly one hundred feet

above him was the baldacchino, four twisting columns of bronze and gold crowned by a majestic canopy. ~~On that morning, it was partially concealed by an aluminum scaffolding.~~ Bernini's masterpiece, with its ornate figures and sprigs of olive and bay, was a magnet for dust and smoke. Every year, in the week preceding the beginning of Lent, Moretti and his men gave it a thorough cleaning. The Vatican was a place of timeless ritual, and there was ritual, too, in the cleaning of the baldacchino. Laid down by Moretti himself, it stated that once the scaffolding was in place, he was always the first to scale it. The view from the summit was one that only a handful of people had ever seen — and Niccolò Moretti, as chief of the *sampietrini*, demanded the privilege of beholding it first.

Moretti climbed to the pinnacle of the front column, then, after attaching his safety line, inched his way on all fours up the slope of the canopy. At the very apex of the baldacchino was a globe supported by four ribs and crowned by a cross. Here was the most sacred spot in the Roman Catholic Church, the vertical axis running from the exact center of the dome straight down into the Tomb of St. Peter. It represented the very idea on which the enterprise rested. *You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.* As the first crepuscular rays of light illuminated the interior of the Basilica, Moretti, faithful servant of the popes, could almost feel the finger of God tapping him on the shoulder.

As usual, time slipped from his grasp. Later, when questioned by the Vatican police, he would be unable to recall exactly how long he had been atop the baldacchino before he saw the object for the first time. From Moretti's lofty perspective, it appeared to be a broken-winged bird. He assumed it to be something innocent, a tarpaulin left by another *sampietrino* or perhaps a scarf dropped by a tourist. They were always leaving their possessions behind, Moretti thought, including things that had no business being in a church.

Regardless, it had to be investigated, and so Moretti, the spell broken, maneuvered himself cautiously around and made the long descent to the floor. He set out across the transept but within a few paces realized the object was not a discarded scarf or tarpaulin at all. Moving closer, he could see the blood dried on the sacred marble of his Basilica and the eyes staring upward into the dome sightlessly, like his four hundred statues. "Dear God in heaven," he whispered as he hurried down the nave. "Please take pity on her poor soul."

The public would know little of the events immediately following Niccolò Moretti's discovery, for they were carried out in the strictest tradition of the Vatican, in complete secrecy and with a hint of Jesuitical low cunning. No one beyond the walls would know, for example, that the first person Moretti sought out was the cardinal rector of the Basilica, an exacting German from Cologne with a well-honed instinct for self-preservation. The cardinal had been around long enough to recognize trouble when he saw it, which explained why he neglected to report the incident to the police, choosing instead to summon the true keeper of the law inside the Vatican.

Consequently, five minutes later, Niccolò Moretti would bear witness to an extraordinary scene — the private secretary to His Holiness Pope Paul VII picking through the pockets of a dead woman on the floor of the Basilica. The monsignor removed a single item and then set out for the Apostolic Palace. By the time he reached his office, he had settled on a course of action. There would have to be two investigations, he concluded, one for public consumption, the other for his own. And for the private inquiry to be successful, it would have to be carried out by a person of trust and discretion. Not surprisingly, the monsignor chose as his inquisitor a man much like himself. A fallen angel in black. A sinner in the city of saints.

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## PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, ROME

THE RESTORER DRESSED IN DARKNESS, silently, so as not to wake the woman. Posing as she was now, with her tousled chestnut hair and wide mouth, she reminded him of Modigliani's *Red Nude*. He placed the loaded Beretta pistol next to her on the bed. Then he tugged at the duvet, exposing her heavy, rounded breasts, and the masterpiece was complete.

Somewhere a church bell tolled. A hand rose from the bedding, warm and lined from sleep, and drew the restorer down. The woman kissed him, as always, with her eyes closed. Her hair smelled of vanilla. On her lips was the faintest trace of the wine she had drunk the previous evening in a restaurant on the Aventine Hill.

The woman released him, murmured something unintelligible, and drifted back to sleep. The restorer covered her. Then he wedged a second Beretta into the waistband of his faded blue jeans and slipped out of the apartment. Downstairs, the pavements of the Via Gregoriana shimmered in the halcyon light like a newly varnished painting. The restorer stood in the doorway of the building for a moment while pretending to consult his mobile phone. It took him only a few seconds to spot the man watching him from behind the wheel of a parked Lancia sedan. He gave the man a friendly wave, the ultimate professional insult, and set off toward the Church of the Trinità dei Monti.

At the top of the Spanish Steps, an old *gattara* was dropping scraps of food into the sea of skinned Roman cats swirling at her feet. Dressed in a shabby overcoat and headscarf, she eyed the restorer warily as he headed down to the piazza. He was below average in height — five foot eight, perhaps, but no more — and had the spare physique of a cyclist. The face was long and narrow at the chin, with wide cheekbones and a slender nose that looked as though it had been carved from wood. The eyes were an unnatural shade of green; the hair was dark and shot with gray at the temples. It was a face of many possible origins, and the restorer possessed the linguistic gifts to put it to good use. Over the course of a long career, he had worked in Italy and elsewhere under numerous pseudonyms and nationalities. The Italian security services, aware of his past exploits, had tried to prevent his entry into the country but had relented after the quiet intervention of the Holy See. For reasons never made public, the restorer had been present at the Vatican several years earlier when it was attacked by Islamic terrorists. More than seven hundred people were killed that day, including four cardinals and eight Curial bishops. The Holy Father himself had been slightly wounded. He might very well have been among the dead had the restorer not shielded him from a shoulder-fired missile and then carried him to safety.

The Italians had imposed two conditions upon the restorer's return — that he reside in the country under his real name and that he tolerate the presence of occasional physical surveillance. The first he accepted with a certain relief, for after a lifetime on the secret battlefield he was anxious to shed his many aliases and to assume something of a normal life. The second condition, however, had proved more burdensome. The task of following him invariably fell to young trainees. Initially, the restorer had taken mild professional offense until he realized he was being used as the subject of a daily master class in the techniques of street surveillance. He obliged his students by evading them from time to time, always keeping a few of his better moves in reserve lest he find himself in circumstances that required slipping the Italian net.

And so it was that as he made his way through the quiet streets of Rome, he was trailed by no fewer than three probationers of varying skills from the Italian security service. His route presented

them with few challenges and no surprises. It bore him westward across the ancient center of the city and terminated, as usual, at St. Anne's Gate, the business entrance of the Vatican. Because it was technically an international frontier, the watchers had no choice but to entrust the restorer to the care of the Swiss Guard, who admitted him with only a cursory glance at his credentials.

The restorer bade the watchers farewell with a doff of his flat cap and then set out along the Via Belvedere, past the butter-colored Church of St. Anne, the Vatican printing offices, and the headquarters of the Vatican Bank. At the Central Post Office, he turned to the right and crossed a series of courtyards until he came to an unmarked door. Beyond it was a tiny foyer, where a Vatican gendarme sat in a glass box.

"Where's the usual duty officer?" the restorer asked in rapid Italian.

"Lazio played Milan last night," the gendarme said with an apathetic shrug.

He ran the restorer's ID badge through the magnetic card swipe and motioned for him to pass through the metal detector. When the machine emitted a shrill pinging, the restorer stopped in his tracks and nodded wearily at the gendarme's computer. On the screen, next to the restorer's unsmiling photograph, was a special notice written by the chief of the Vatican Security Office. The gendarme read it twice to make certain he understood it correctly, then, looking up, found himself staring directly into the restorer's unusually green eyes. Something about the calmness of his expression — and the hint of a mischievous smile — caused the officer to give an involuntary shiver. He nodded toward the next set of doors and watched intently as the restorer passed through them without a sound.

So, the gendarme thought, the rumors were true. Gabriel Allon, renowned restorer of Old Master paintings, retired Israeli spy and assassin, and savior of the Holy Father, had returned to the Vatican. With a single keystroke, the officer cleared the file from the screen. Then he made the sign of the cross and for the first time in many years recited the act of contrition. It was an odd choice, he thought, because he was guilty of no sin other than curiosity. But surely that was to be forgiven. After all, it wasn't every day a lowly Vatican policeman had the chance to gaze into the face of a legend.

Fluorescent lights, dimmed to their night settings, hummed softly as Gabriel entered the maintenance conservation lab of the Vatican Picture Gallery. As usual, he was the first to arrive. He closed the door and waited for the reassuring thud of the automatic locks, then made his way along a row of storage cabinets toward the floor-to-ceiling black curtains at the far end of the room. A small sign warned that the area beyond the curtains was strictly off-limits. After slipping through the breach, Gabriel went immediately to his trolley and carefully examined the disposition of his supplies. His containers of pigment and medium were precisely as he had left them. So were his Winsor & Newton Series 7 sable brushes, including the one with a telltale spot of azure near the tip that he always left at a precise thirty-degree angle relative to the others. It suggested the cleaning staff had once again resisted the temptation to enter his workspace. He doubted whether his colleagues had shown similar restraint. In fact, he had it on the highest authority that his tiny curtained enclave had displaced the espresso machine in the break room as the most popular gathering spot for museum staff.

He removed his leather jacket and switched on a pair of standing halogen lamps. *The Deposition of Christ*, widely regarded as Caravaggio's finest painting, glowed under the intense white light. Gabriel stood motionless before the towering canvas for several minutes, hand pressed to his chin, head tilted to one side, eyes fixed on the haunting image. Nicodemus, muscular and barefoot, stared directly back as he carefully lowered the pale, lifeless body of Christ toward the slab of funerary stone where it would be prepared for entombment. Next to Nicodemus was John the Evangelist, who, in his desperation to touch his beloved teacher one last time, had inadvertently opened the wound in the Savior's side. Watching silently over them were the Madonna and the Magdalene, their heads bowed

while Mary of Cleophas raised her arms toward the heavens in lamentation. It was a work of both immense sorrow and tenderness, made more striking by Caravaggio's revolutionary use of light. Even Gabriel, who had been toiling over the painting for weeks, always felt as though he were intruding on a heartbreaking moment of private anguish.

The painting had darkened with age, particularly along the left side of the canvas where the entrance of the tomb had once been clearly visible. There were some in the Italian art establishment — including Giacomo Benedetti, the famed Caravaggista from the Istituto Centrale per il Restauro — who wondered whether the tomb should be returned to prominence. Benedetti had been forced to share his opinion with a reporter from *La Repubblica* because the restorer chosen for the project had, for inexplicable reasons, failed to seek his advice before commencing work. What's more, Benedetti found it disheartening that the museum had refused to make public the restorer's identity. For many days, the papers had bristled with familiar calls for the Vatican to lift the veil of silence. How was it possible, they fumed, that a national treasure like *The Deposition* could be entrusted to a man with no name? The tempest, such as it was, finally ended when Antonio Calvesi, the Vatican's chief conservator, acknowledged that the man in question had impeccable credentials, including two masterful restorations for the Holy See — Reni's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* and Poussin's *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*. Calvesi neglected to mention that both projects, conducted at a remote Umbrian villa, had been delayed due to operations the restorer had carried out for the secret intelligence service of the State of Israel.

Gabriel had hoped to restore the Caravaggio in seclusion as well, but Calvesi's decree that the painting never leave the Vatican had left him with no choice but to work inside the lab, surrounded by the permanent staff. He was the subject of intense curiosity, but then, that was to be expected. For many years, they had believed him to be an unusually gifted if temperamental restorer named Marco Delvecchio, only to learn that he was something quite different. But if they felt betrayed, they gave no sign of it. Indeed, for the most part, they treated him with a tenderness that came naturally to those who care for damaged objects. They were quiet in his presence, mindful to a point of his obvious need for privacy, and were careful not to look too long into his eyes, as if they feared what they might find there. On those rare occasions when they addressed him, their remarks were limited mainly to pleasantries and art. And when office banter turned to the politics of the Middle East, they respectfully muted their criticism of the country of his birth. Only Enrico Bacci, who had lobbied intensely for the Caravaggio restoration, objected to Gabriel's presence on moral grounds. He referred to the black curtain as "the Separation Fence" and adhered a "Free Palestine" poster to the wall of his tiny office.

Gabriel poured a tiny pool of Mowolith 20 medium onto his palette, added a few granules of dark pigment, and thinned the mixture with Arcosolve until it reached the desired consistency and intensity. Then he slipped on a magnifying visor and focused his gaze on the right hand of Christ, hung in the manner of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, with the fingers pointing allegorically toward the corner of the funerary stone. For several days, Gabriel had been attempting to repair a series of abrasions along the knuckles. He was not the first artist to struggle over the composition; Caravaggio himself had painted five other versions before finally completing the painting in 1604. Unlike his previous commission — a depiction of the Virgin's death so controversial it was eventually removed from the church of Santa Maria della Scala — *The Deposition* was instantly hailed as a masterwork, and its reputation quickly spread throughout Europe. In 1797, the painting caught the eye of Napoléon Bonaparte, one of history's greatest looters of art and antiquities, and it was carted over the Alps to Paris. It remained there until 1817, when it was returned to the custody of the papacy and hung in the Vatican.

For several hours, Gabriel had the lab to himself. Then, at the thoroughly Roman hour of ten, he heard the snap of the automatic locks, followed by Enrico Bacci's lumbering plod. Next came

Donatella Ricci, an Early Renaissance expert who whispered soothingly to the paintings in her care. After that it was Tommaso Antonelli, one of the stars of the Sistine Chapel restoration, who always tiptoed around the lab in his crepe-soled shoes with the stealth of a night thief.

Finally, at half past ten, Gabriel heard the distinctive tap of Antonio Calvesi's handmade shoes over the linoleum floor. A few seconds later, Calvesi came whirling through the black curtain like a matador. With his disheveled forelock and perpetually loosened necktie, he had the air of a man who was running late for an appointment he would rather not keep. He settled himself atop a tall stool and nibbled thoughtfully at the stem of his reading glasses while inspecting Gabriel's work.

"Not bad," Calvesi said with genuine admiration. "Did you do that on your own, or did Caravaggio drop by to handle the in-painting himself?"

"I asked for his help," Gabriel replied, "but he was unavailable."

"Really? Where was he?"

"Back in prison at Tor di Nona. Apparently, he was roaming the Campo Marzio with a sword."

"Again?" Calvesi leaned closer to the canvas. "If I were you, I'd consider replacing those lines of craquelure along the index finger."

Gabriel raised his magnifying visor and offered Calvesi the palette. The Italian responded with a conciliatory smile. He was a gifted restorer in his own right — indeed, in their youth, the two men had been rivals — but it had been many years since he had actually applied a brush to canvas. These days Calvesi spent most of his time pursuing money. For all its earthly riches, the Vatican was forced to rely on the kindness of strangers to care for its extraordinary collection of art and antiquities. Gabriel's paltry stipend was a fraction of what he earned for a private restoration. It was, however, a small price to pay for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to clean a painting like *The Deposition*.

"Any chance you might actually finish it sometime soon?" Calvesi asked. "I'd like to have it back in the gallery for Holy Week."

"When does it fall this year?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that." Calvesi picked absently through the contents of Gabriel's trolley.

"Something on your mind, Antonio?"

"One of our most important patrons is dropping by the museum tomorrow. An American. Very deep pockets. The kind of pockets that keep this place functioning."

"And?"

"He's asked to see the Caravaggio. In fact, he was wondering whether someone might be willing to give him a brief lecture on the restoration."

"Have you been sniffing the acetone again, Antonio?"

"Won't you at least let him see it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Gabriel gazed at the painting for a moment in silence. "Because it wouldn't be fair to him," he said finally.

"The patron?"

"Caravaggio. Restoration is supposed to be our little secret, Antonio. Our job is to come and go without being seen. And it should be done in private."

"What if I get Caravaggio's permission?"

"Just don't ask him while he has a sword in his hand." Gabriel lowered the magnifying visor and resumed his work.

"You know, Gabriel, you're just like him. Stubborn, conceited, and far too talented for your own good."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Antonio?" asked Gabriel, tapping his brush impatiently.

against his palette.

“Not me,” Calvesi replied, “but you’re wanted in the chapel.”

---

“Which chapel?”

“The only one that matters.”

Gabriel wiped his brush and placed it carefully on the trolley. Calvesi smiled.

“You share one other trait with your friend Caravaggio.”

“What’s that?”

“Paranoia.”

“Caravaggio had good reason to be paranoid. And so do I.”

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## THE SISTINE CHAPEL

THE 5,896 SQUARE FEET OF the Sistine Chapel are perhaps the most visited piece of real estate in Rome. Each day, several thousand tourists pour through its rather ordinary doors to crane their necks and wonder at the glorious frescoes that adorn its walls and ceiling, watched over by blue-uniformed gendarmes who seem to have no other job than to constantly plead for *silenzio*. To stand alone in the chapel, however, is to experience it as its namesake Pope Sixtus IV had intended. With the lights dimmed and the crowds absent, it is almost possible to hear the quarrels of conclaves past or to see Michelangelo atop his scaffolding putting the finishing touches on *The Creation of Adam*.

On the western wall of the chapel is Michelangelo's other Sistine masterwork, *The Last Judgment*. Begun thirty years after the ceiling was completed, it depicts the Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ, with all the souls of humanity rising or falling to meet their eternal reward or punishment in a swirl of color and anguish. The fresco is the first thing the cardinals see when they enter the chapel to choose a new pope, and on that morning it seemed the primary preoccupation of every single priest. Tall, lean, and strikingly handsome, he was cloaked in a black cassock with a magenta-colored sash and piping, handmade by an ecclesiastical tailor near the Pantheon. His dark eyes radiated a fierce and uncompromising intelligence, while the set of his jaw indicated he was a dangerous man to cross, which had the added benefit of being the truth. Monsignor Luigi Donati, private secretary to His Holiness Pope Paul VII, had few friends behind the walls of the Vatican, only occasional allies and sworn rivals. They often referred to him as a clerical Rasputin, the true power behind the papal throne, or "the Black Pope," an unflattering reference to his Jesuit past. Donati did not mind. Though he was a devoted student of Ignatius and Augustine, he tended to rely more on the guidance of a secular Italian philosopher named Machiavelli, who counseled that it is far better for a prince to be feared than loved.

Among Donati's many transgressions, at least in the eyes of some members of the Vatican's gossipy papal court, were his unusually close ties to the notorious spy and assassin Gabriel Alloviti. Theirs was a partnership that defied history and faith — Donati, the soldier of Christ, and Gabriel, the man of art who by accident of birth had been compelled to lead a clandestine life of violence. Despite those obvious differences, they had much in common. Both were men of high morals and principles, and both believed that matters of consequence were best handled in private. During their long friendship, Gabriel had acted as both the Vatican's protector and a revealer of some of its darkest secrets — and Donati, the Holy Father's hard man in black, had served as his willing accomplice. As a result, the two men had done much to quietly improve the tortured relationship between the world's Catholics and their twelve million distant spiritual cousins, the Jews.

Gabriel stood wordlessly at Donati's side and gazed up at *The Last Judgment*. Near the center of the image, adjacent to the left foot of Christ, was one of two self-portraits Michelangelo had hidden within the frescoes. Here he had depicted himself as St. Bartholomew holding his own flayed skin, perhaps a not-so-subtle rejoinder to contemporary critics of his work.

"I assume you've been here before," said Donati, his sonorous voice echoing in the empty chapel.

"Just once," said Gabriel after a moment. "It was in the autumn of 1972, long before the restoration. I was posing as a German student traveling Europe. I came here in the afternoon and stayed until the guards forced me to leave. The next day ..."

His voice trailed off. The next day, with Michelangelo's vision of the end times still fresh in his

mind, Gabriel entered the foyer of a drab apartment building in the Piazza Annibaliano. Standing before the elevator, a bottle of fig wine in one hand and a copy of *A Thousand and One Nights* in the other, was a skinny Palestinian intellectual named Wadal Zwaiter. The Palestinian was a member of the terrorist group Black September, perpetrators of the Munich Olympics massacre, and for that he had been secretly sentenced to death. Gabriel had calmly asked Zwaiter to say his name aloud. Then he had shot him eleven times, once for each Israeli butchered at Munich. In the months that followed, Gabriel would assassinate five other members of Black September, the opening act of a distinguished career that lasted far longer than he ever intended. Working at the behest of his mentor, the legendary spymaster Ari Shamron, he had carried out some of the most fabled operations in the history of Israeli intelligence. Now, blown and battered, he had returned to Rome, to the place where it all began. And one of the few people in the world he could trust was a Catholic priest named Luigi Donati.

Gabriel turned his back to *The Last Judgment* and gazed down the length of the rectangular chapel, past the frescoes by Botticelli and Perugino, toward the little potbellied stove where balloons were burned during papal conclaves. Then he recited, “The House which King Solomon built for the Lord was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high.”

“Kings,” said Donati. “Chapter six, verse two.”

Gabriel lifted his face toward the ceiling. “Your forefathers built this rather simple chapel to the exact dimensions of the Temple of Solomon for a reason. But why? Did they wish to pay tribute to their elder brothers the Jews? Or were they declaring that the old law had been superseded by the new law, that the ancient temple had been brought to Rome, along with the sacred contents of the Holy of Holies?”

“Perhaps it was a little of both,” said Donati philosophically.

“How diplomatic of you, Monsignor.”

“I was trained as a Jesuit. Obfuscation is our strong suit.”

Gabriel pondered his wristwatch. “It’s rather late in the morning for this place to be empty.”

“Yes,” Donati said absently.

“Where are the tourists, Luigi?”

“For the moment, only the museums are open to the public.”

“Why?”

“We have a problem.”

“Where?”

Donati frowned and tilted his head toward the left.

The stairwell leading from the glory of the Sistine Chapel to the most magnificent church in Christendom is decidedly ugly. A gray-green tube with slick cement walls, it deposited Gabriel and Donati into the Basilica, not far from the Chapel of the Pietà. In the center of the nave, a yellow tarpaulin was spread over the unmistakable form of a human corpse. Standing over it were two men Gabriel knew them both. One was Colonel Alois Metzler, commandant of the Pontifical Swiss Guard. The other was Lorenzo Vitale, chief of the Corpo della Gendarmeria, the Vatican’s 130-member police force. In his previous life, Vitale had investigated government corruption cases for Italy’s powerful Guardia di Finanza. Metzler was retired Swiss Army. His predecessor, Karl Brunner, had been killed in the al-Qaeda terrorist attack on the Vatican.

The two men looked up in unison and watched Gabriel crossing the nave at the side of the second-most powerful man in the Roman Catholic Church. Metzler was clearly displeased. He extended his hand toward Gabriel with the cold precision of a Swiss timepiece and nodded his head once in formal greeting. He was Donati’s equal in height and build but had been blessed by the

Almighty with the jutting, angular face of a hound. He wore a dark gray suit, a white shirt, and a banker's silver necktie. His receding hair was shorn to the length of stubble; small, rimless spectacles framed a pair of judgmental blue eyes. Metzler had friends inside the Swiss security service, which meant that he knew about Gabriel's past exploits on the soil of his homeland. His presence in the Basilica was intriguing. Strictly speaking, dead bodies at the Vatican fell under the jurisdiction of the gendarmes, not the Swiss Guard — unless, of course, there was an element of papal security involved. If that were the case, Metzler would be free to poke his snout anywhere he pleased. Almost anywhere, he thought Gabriel, for there were places behind the walls where even the commander of the palace guard was forbidden to enter.

Donati exchanged a look with Vitale, then instructed the police chief to remove the tarpaulin. It was obvious the body had fallen from a great height. What remained was a split sack of skin filled with shattered bone and organs. Remarkably, the attractive face was largely intact. So was the identification badge around the neck. It stated that the bearer was an employee of the Vatican Museums. Gabriel didn't bother to read the name. The dead woman was Claudia Andreatti, a curator in the antiquities division.

Gabriel crouched next to the body with the ease of someone used to being in the presence of the newly dead and examined it as though it were a painting in need of restoration. She was dressed, like all the laywomen of the Vatican, professionally but piously: dark trousers, a gray cardigan, a white blouse. Her woolen overcoat was unbuttoned and had arranged itself across the floor like an unfurled cape. The right arm was draped across the abdomen. The left was extended in a straight line from the shoulder, the wrist slightly bent. Gabriel carefully lifted a few strands of the shoulder-length hair from the face, revealing a pair of eyes that remained open and vaguely watchful. The last time he had seen them, they had been appraising him in a stairwell of the museum. The encounter had occurred a few minutes before nine the previous evening. Gabriel was just leaving after a long session before the Caravaggio; Claudia was clutching a batch of files to her breast and heading back to her office. Her demeanor, though somewhat harried, was hardly that of a woman about to kill herself in St. Peter's. In fact, thought Gabriel, it had been mildly flirtatious.

"You knew her?" asked Vitale.

"No, but I knew who she was." It was a professional compulsion. Even in retirement, Gabriel couldn't help but assemble a mental dossier on those around him.

"I noticed you were both working late last night." The Italian managed to make it sound like an offhand remark, which it wasn't. "According to the log at the security desk, you exited the museum at 8:47. Dottoressa Andreatti left a short time later, at 8:56."

"By then, I'd already left the territory of the city-state via St. Anne's Gate."

"I know." Vitale gave a humorless smile. "I checked those logs, too."

"So I'm no longer a suspect in the death of my colleague?" Gabriel asked sardonically.

"Forgive me, Signor Allon, but people do have a way of dying whenever you show up at the Vatican."

Gabriel lifted his gaze from the body and looked at Vitale. Though he was now in his early sixties, the police chief had the handsome features and permanent suntan of an aging Italian movie idol, the sort who drives down the Via Veneto in an open-top car with a younger woman at his side. As the Guardia di Finanza, he had been regarded as an unbending zealot, a crusader who had taken it upon himself to eliminate the corruption that had been the scourge of Italian politics and commerce for generations. Having failed, he had taken refuge behind the walls of the Vatican to protect his pope and his Church. Like Gabriel, he was a man used to being in the presence of the dead. Even so, he seemed incapable of looking at the woman on the floor of his beloved Basilica.

"Who found her?" asked Gabriel.

Vitale nodded toward a group of *sampietrini* standing halfway down the nave.

“Did they touch anything?”

“Why do you ask?”

“She’s barefoot.”

“We found one of her shoes near the baldacchino. The other was found in front of the Altar of St. Joseph. We assume they came off during the fall. Or ...”

“Or what?”

“It’s possible she dropped them from the gallery of the dome before jumping.”

“Why?”

“Perhaps she wanted to see whether she really had the nerve to go through with it,” Metzler suggested. “A moment of doubt.”

Gabriel looked heavenward. Just above the Latin inscription at the base of the dome was the viewing platform. Running along the edge was a waist-high metal balustrade. It was enough to make suicide difficult, but not impossible. In fact, every few months, Vitale’s gendarmes had to prevent some poor soul from hurling himself into the blessed abyss. But late in the evening, when the Basilica was closed to the public, Claudia Andreotti would have had the gallery entirely to herself.

“Time of death?” asked Gabriel quietly, as though he were posing the question to the corpse itself.

“Unclear,” replied Vitale.

Gabriel looked around the interior of the Basilica, as if to remind the Italian of their whereabouts. Then he asked how it was possible there was no established time of death.

“Once each week,” Vitale answered, “the Central Security Office disables the cameras for a routine system reset. We do it in the evening when the Basilica is closed. Usually, it’s not a problem.”

“How long does the shutdown last?”

“Nine to midnight.”

“That’s quite a coincidence.” Gabriel looked at the body again. “What do you suppose the odds are that she decided to kill herself during the time the cameras were switched off?”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence at all,” said Metzler. “Perhaps she chose the time intentionally so there would be no video recording of her death.”

“How would she have known about the cameras being shut down?”

“It’s common knowledge around here.”

Gabriel shook his head slowly. Despite numerous outside threats, terrorist and otherwise, security inside the borders of the world’s smallest country remained startlingly lax. What’s more, those who worked behind the walls enjoyed extraordinary freedom of movement. They knew the doors that were never locked, the chapels that were never used, and the storerooms where it was possible to plot a scheme, or caress the flesh of a lover in complete privacy. They also knew the secret passageway leading into the Basilica. Gabriel knew one or two himself.

“Was there anyone else in the Basilica at the time?”

“Not that we’re aware of,” replied Vitale.

“But you can’t rule it out.”

“That’s correct. But no one reported anything unusual.”

“Where’s her handbag?”

“She left it up in the gallery before jumping.”

“Was anything missing?”

“Not that we know of.”

But there was something missing; Gabriel was certain of it. He closed his eyes and for an instant saw Claudia as she had been the previous evening — the warm smile, the flirtatious glance from her

brown eyes, the batch of files she had been clutching to her breast.

~~*And the cross of gold around her neck.*~~

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“I’d like to have a look at the gallery,” he said.

“I’ll take you up,” answered Vitale.

“That won’t be necessary.” Gabriel rose. “I’m sure the monsignor will be good enough to show me the way.”

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## ST. PETER'S BASILICA

THERE WERE TWO WAYS TO make the ascent from the main level of the Basilica to the base of the dome — long, twisting stairwell or an elevator large enough to accommodate two dozen well-fed pilgrims. Donati, an unrepentant smoker, suggested the elevator, but Gabriel headed for the steps instead.

“The elevator is shut down in the afternoon after the last group of tourists is admitted. There’s no other way Claudia could have used it late at night.”

“That’s true,” Donati said with a morose glance at his handmade loafers, “but it’s several hundred steps.”

“And we’re going to search every one.”

“For what?”

“When I saw Claudia last night, she was wearing a gold cross around her neck.”

“And?”

“It’s no longer there.”

Gabriel mounted the first step with Donati at his heels and climbed slowly upward. His careful search of the stairwell produced nothing but a few discarded admission tickets and a crumpled flyer advertising the services of a less-than-saintly enterprise involving young women from Eastern Europe. At the top of the stairs was a landing. In one direction was the roof terrace; in the other, the viewing gallery for the dome. Gabriel peered over the balustrade at the now-miniaturized figures of Vitale and Metzler, then set out slowly along the catwalk with his eyes lowered toward the timeworn marble floor. After a few paces, he found the cross. The clasp was intact, but the thin gold chain had been snapped.

“It’s possible she tore it off before climbing over the balustrade,” Donati said, examining the broken chain by the light of one of the dome’s sixteen windows.

“I suppose anything is possible. But the more likely explanation is that the chain was broken by someone else.”

“Who?”

“The person who killed her.” Gabriel was silent for a moment. “Her neck was snapped like a twig, Luigi. I suppose the break could have occurred on impact, but I believe it happened up here. Her killer probably didn’t notice he broke the chain of Claudia’s cross as well. He did notice the shoes, though. That’s why they were found so far apart. He probably hurled them over the barrier before making his escape.”

“How certain are you that she was murdered?”

“As certain as you are.” Gabriel studied Donati’s face carefully. “Something tells me you know more than you’re saying, Luigi.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Is there anything you wish to confess, Monsignor?”

“Yes,” said Donati, peering down at the floor of the Basilica. “It’s possible the person responsible for Claudia Andreatti’s death might be standing right in front of you.”

They headed out onto the roof terrace of the Basilica to walk among the apostles and the saints. Donati’s black cassock billowed and snapped in the cold wind. In one hand, entwined around his fingers like the beads of a rosary, was Claudia’s gold necklace.

“She was conducting ...” Donati paused for a moment, as if searching for the appropriate word. “An investigation,” he said at last.

“What sort of investigation?”

“The only kind we ever do around here.”

“A secret investigation,” said Gabriel. “Ordered by you, of course.”

“At the behest of the Holy Father,” Donati added hastily.

“And the nature of this investigation?”

“As you know, there’s been a debate raging within the art world and the curatorial community over who owns antiquity. For centuries, the great empires of Europe looted the treasures of the ancient world with reckless abandon. The Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles, the great temples of ancient Egypt — the list goes on and on. Now the source countries are demanding the symbols of their cultural heritage be returned. And they often turn to the police and courts for help in getting them back.”

“You were afraid the Vatican Museums were vulnerable?”

“We probably are.” Donati paused along the façade of the Basilica and pointed toward the Egyptian obelisk in the center of the square. “It’s one of eight here in Rome. They were built by craftsmen from an empire that no longer exists and brought here by soldiers of an empire that also no longer exists. Should we send them back to Egypt? What about the Venus de Milo or the Winged Victory of Samothrace? Would they really be better off in Athens than in the Louvre? Would more people see them?”

“You sound like a bit of a hawk on this issue.”

“My enemies often mistake me for a liberal who’s trying to destroy the Church. In reality, despite my Jesuit education, I am as doctrinaire as they come. I believe that great treasures of antiquity should be displayed in great museums.”

“Why Claudia?”

“Because she disagreed with me vehemently,” Donati replied. “I didn’t want the report to be a whitewash. I wanted the potential worst-case scenario, the unvarnished truth about the source of every piece in our possession. The Vatican’s collection is among the oldest and largest in the world. And much of it is completely unprovenanced.”

“Which means you don’t know exactly where it came from.”

“Or even when it was acquired.” Donati shook his head slowly. “You might find this hard to believe, but until the 1930s, the Vatican Library had no proper catalog system. Books were stored by size and color. *Size and color*,” Donati repeated incredulously. “I’m afraid the record keeping at the museums wasn’t much better.”

“So you asked Claudia to undertake a review of the collection to see whether any of the pieces might be tainted.”

“With a special emphasis on the Egyptian and Etruscan collections,” Donati added. “But I should stipulate that Claudia’s inquiry was completely defensive in nature. In a way, it was a bit like a campaign manager who investigates his own candidate in order to uncover any dirt his opponent might find.”

“And if she’d discovered a problem?”

“We would have weighed our options carefully,” Donati said with lawyerly precision. “Lengthy deliberation is our specialty. It’s one of the reasons we’re still around after two thousand years.”

The two men turned and started slowly back toward the dome. Gabriel asked how long Claudia had been working on the project.

“Six months.”

“Who else knew about it?”

“Only the director of the museum. And the Holy Father, of course.”

“Had she given you any findings?”

“Not yet.” Donati hesitated. “But we had a meeting scheduled. She said she had something urgent to tell me.”

“What was it?”

“She didn’t say.”

“When were you supposed to meet?”

“Last night.” Donati paused, then added, “At nine o’clock.”

Gabriel stopped and turned toward Donati. “Why so late?”

“Running a church of one billion souls is a big job. It was the only time I was free.”

“What happened?”

“Claudia called my assistant and asked to reschedule the meeting for this morning. She didn’t give a reason.”

Donati removed a cigarette from an elegant gold case and tapped it against the cover before igniting it with a gold lighter. Not for the first time, Gabriel had to remind himself that the tall man in black was actually a Catholic priest.

“In case you’re wondering,” Donati said, “I did not kill Claudia Andreatti. Nor do I know who anyone would want her dead. But if it becomes public that I was scheduled to meet with her the evening of her death, I’ll be placed in a difficult position, to say the least. And so will the Holy Father.”

“Which is why you haven’t mentioned any of this to Vitale or Metzler.”

Donati was silent.

“What do you want from me, Luigi?”

“I want you to help protect my Church from another scandal. And me, as well.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Two investigations. One will be carried out by Vitale and the gendarmes. It will be short in duration and will conclude that Dottoressa Andreatti took her own life by throwing herself from the gallery of the dome.”

“Rome has spoken; the case is closed.”

“Amen.”

“And the second investigation?”

“Will be carried out by you,” Donati said. “And its findings will be presented to only one person.”

“The private secretary to His Holiness Pope Paul VII.”

Donati nodded.

“I came to Rome to restore a painting, Luigi.”

“You wouldn’t be in Rome if it wasn’t for the intervention of my master and me. And now we need a favor in return.”

“How Christlike of you, Monsignor.”

“Christ never had to run a church. I do.”

Gabriel smiled in spite of himself. “You told the Italian security services you needed me to clear a Caravaggio. Something tells me they won’t be pleased if they find out I’m conducting a murder investigation.”

“So I suppose we’ll have to deceive them. Trust me,” Donati added, “it won’t be the first time.”

They paused along the railing. Directly below, in the small courtyard outside the entrance to the Vatican necropolis, the body of Claudia Andreatti was being placed in the back of an unmarked van. Standing a few feet away, like a mourner at the side of an open grave, was Lorenzo Vitale.

“I’ll need a few things to get started,” Gabriel said, watching the Vatican police chief. “And

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