

THE GLAMOUR OF EVIL

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A Maddie Lynch Mystery

by

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To our daughter, Rose,
with exponential love, joy and pride.
--Pops and Mumma

“The best and most effective espionage service
that I know in the world belongs to the
Vatican.”

Simon Wiesenthal

“And the Lord said unto Satan,
From whence comest thou?”
And Satan answered the Lord, and said,
“From going to and fro in the earth,
and from walking up and down on it.”

Job 2

1. New York City.

Christopher Zimmerman has to laugh. The rendezvous spot is not one that he would have chosen, and yet it is perfect. An abandoned church on the far west side of Manhattan, and in Hell's Kitchen no less. It would be the ideal place to trade his secret for what he wants in return. And what he wants is nothing less than the greater glory of God. And some cash to buy it.

The church, St. Martin's, is a beauty. Built in the late Victorian Gothic style with red brick masonry and terracotta dressing, it had housed a dwindling Lutheran community until the early 2000s, and then it shuttered.

What could they expect, really? Zimmerman believes that their failure is payback for that uppity German monk and his hammer and nails a few centuries back.

Martin Luther is to blame here for this abandoned church in Hell's Kitchen and Christopher Zimmerman will be thanked for the reconsecration of it for the one true faith. He will have to negotiate the price. Later. After he has sold what he is here to sell.

She said she'd be blonde and wearing black, and so she is. When Zimmerman spots his contact going into the church, his heart thuds faster. She looks from a distance so much like his Regina. She wears a black tracksuit and has her blonde hair tucked under a black baseball cap. As for her eyes, they are behind black sunglasses. She's dressed as if she is someone famous who doesn't want to be seen on her way to the gym on this cool and cloudy

afternoon in mid-April. And not a woman sneaking into a deconsecrated church.

Christopher Zimmerman was surprised when her team agreed to meet him. He thought they might want to rendezvous in some hotel bar in Washington, where deals like he was proposing are made. But no, Regina's team insisted that he come to New York, and to come under heavy cover. So he did. Breezing through JFK on his regular Swiss passport, and not the other one from the Vatican, which would have been even faster, but got tagged at customs as "official business."

He isn't here on official Vatican business. He is here to do something that the Vatican cannot and will not do. He will change the western world for the better. And this woman who looks like Regina is going to help him to do that. The fact that she does look like his Regina is one more sign for Zimmermann that approval of his plan comes down from God Himself.

Christopher Zimmerman crosses West 57th and enters the church. Despite its handsome exterior, the church's interior reflects a characteristically Protestant lack of imagination. No stained glass, no sacred statues, no perfume of incense. The pews have been sold off, and now only a circle of chairs stands next to a table draped in a white tablecloth, a laptop upon it, all before a plain wooden altar in a large white room. The kind of room where you would have to work hard to connect to heaven. If at all.

However, a vision of heaven is standing on the altar today. It's that woman in black, smiling at him.

“Hello, Christopher,” she says. Her accent is flat. Not of New York. Not of the south, either, but somewhere in the middle. Zimmerman prides himself on knowing his American accents, and this is the kind you’d have if you never wanted anyone to notice. He smiles. She wants to be seen as neutral. So he turns up the guttural volume on his Swiss accent. He is anything but neutral.

“Hello, Jane,” he says, offering a courtly bow. He suspects that Jane Jones is not her real name, but it doesn’t matter. So long as she can pay for what he is selling, then she can be called anything.

Jane Jones smiles at him with the smile she knows works on male clients, even the holy ones, a smile of promise. “Shall we?” she says, and gestures to one of the chairs before the table with the laptop.

“So we shall,” he replies and then sits, still smiling, even more expectantly.

She sits next to him, and he guesses her age to be about thirty. She has fine pale skin, and a body that is not as voluptuous as Regina’s, but she’s tall. She’s taller than Zimmerman, maybe six feet. She works out, and her smooth unblemished face could be that of a child, save for her eyes. With her sunglasses now cresting her forehead, those eyes are an icy blue gray, like a cold sea where boats capsize in winter winds and their secrets go to the deep. Or, thinks Zimmerman, the same shade as the Bombay Sapphire gin he’ll be raising in his first-class seat on his way back home to Rome tonight.

“What is our destination?” Jane Jones asks almost tenderly, as if they are both going on a luxury vacation.

But then she raises the laptop screen that asks for a banking address.

Zimmerman reaches into his inside coat pocket and produces an envelope. "It's all in here," he says.

"Excellent," she replies, and peeks into the envelope. Then she taps in a sequence of letters and numbers, and shows him the account in an Austrian bank. "Very secure. The transfer will happen seamlessly once we're done."

Zimmerman almost laughs. If only she knew what he does about Austrian banks. And he watches as the agreed upon amount arrives in the account. It is a fine number: \$250 million in USD. That will go a long way to doing what needs to be done, and what he will do: save the Christian world from destruction.

"Excellent," he says. Then he hands her another envelope.

She takes it but doesn't even open it. Instead, she logs into her Tor browser which will take them to the dark web, a place that can't be traced by snoopers who might be in the church ether, and she types in the first of Zimmerman's URLs.

On the website is a series of folders. One is labeled "Regina Photos", and the other two, "Regina Correspondence". His Regina.

Jane Jones clicks on the Regina Photos folder. She doesn't react to the thumbnails, many of them photos of Regina naked, or mostly naked, and in her early 20s. Then Jane hits delete. She does that for each of the folders, bearing the exact same names as the first set, on

the five URLs that Zimmerman has given to her. Each time he feels a fever flashing over his body, his body remembering Regina. Then a hum of relief. It's over.

She looks at each folder before she vaporizes it, and says nothing. Zimmerman watches her, aroused by her non-reaction. Sure, he has forty years on her, but she might catch a whiff of the lather of this mighty transaction and who knows where things could go?

"That's everything?" she asks, after deleting the contents of the last folder, now looking at him with those frozen blue eyes.

"Yes, everything." Which isn't true, because he needs a parachute, just in case they somehow try to screw him. He knows from his own time as a banker in the secular world that you can never have too many parachutes, but he also knows that all he needs is one that works. And he has that.

"You're sure?" Jane continues. "Because if everything is not gone, you will be gone."

She says this with such a friendly, easy manner, he might think she was joking, but her eyes say otherwise. If they have to come to find him, they will kill him. So, he will make sure he cannot be found by the likes of this woman in black.

"Yes. I understand what you need, and you understand what I need. We are complete."

Jane Jones looks at him in her genial way, eyes still freezing cold. "Good." She returns to the bank account website and keys in the transfer of the money to the account number that he had given her on the first

envelope.

Zimmerman watches the money flow from her account to his and he nods, well pleased. "That was much easier than I thought it would be," he says. That isn't true, either. Zimmerman knows from his time in the Vatican Bank just how easy it is to move money around, if no one is watching you too closely.

"We like to be efficient," Jane replies. Then she reaches under the table and surprises Zimmerman with his favorite champagne. She has placed a bottle of Krug Grand Cuvée in an ice bucket, and now produces two crystal flutes. "And I think this deserves a toast."

Zimmerman smiles at her. She has done her homework on him. And he appreciates her style. A glass of champagne in a deconsecrated Lutheran church with this reasonable facsimile of Regina will be a fine way to end a transaction that has benefitted them both.

Jane Jones pops the cork, then hands him a glass of champagne, and pours herself one. "To Reagan," she says.

Zimmerman raises his glass and replies, "To Regina."

Then he takes a long sip. The champagne is perfect and he sighs at its ticklish effervescence. Jane takes a more modest sip and sighs back.

Zimmerman drains his glass and Jane pours him another. Then she walks behind him, and wraps her arms around his chest. Zimmerman is pleasantly surprised. He hasn't expected her to try to seduce him. But he will go along, for old time's sake. For Regina's sake.

Then he feels a prick on his neck and sees the syringe

suddenly in her hand. “Sssh, sssh,” she says, before he can say anything, “you’ll soon be where you’ve always wanted to go.”

“Where’s that?” he says reflexively, astonished by this turn of events. But his words are slurred, for his muscles feel like they are melting.

“Heaven, of course,” she replies, then jabs him with another syringe. The first to relax, the second, to kill.

As Christopher Zimmerman fades away in a deconsecrated church in Hell’s Kitchen, his life with Regina flies across his mind’s eye, and it gives him one last burst of hope. He has not given Jane Jones everything that he has collected on Regina. He kept a parachute in a very safe place. And Jane Jones will know that fact as soon as the people who are with him on his quest know that he is dead. He might be going to heaven, but he will send Jane Jones to hell.

2. New York City.

Maddie Lynch looks out the window on to 43rd Street and silently curses. The guy on the other end of the Zoom call is not making her life easy, and he seems to enjoy it. Now, in the middle of her pitch to Brett Muenster—“Moonster, not Monster,” he jokes—he has vanished from the screen to take a call on his cell. For talking to this asshole, she says to herself, she will upgrade her post-work shot of Jameson’s to a fat double. One ice cube.

Maddie takes a breath and reminds herself that, given the state of things, at 29 years old, she is lucky to have this job. And for the most part, her work as a chase producer at the International News Network is a straight line. She books the guests for her boss, Teddy Wright’s show, *I’m Wright, with Teddy Wright*, she does the pre-interviews with the guests, and she preps the questions for Teddy. Then she watches as Teddy does her own thing and goes off in directions no one has imagined except for the show’s legal team.

Teddy’s independence from consistently red or blue politics is what makes Teddy’s show the most highly rated on INN’s prime time slate, even though INN is about as blue a network as you can get and still be in the blue section of the color palette. Teddy’s stubborn take on the political landscape defies color-coding, and that’s what makes her so popular. And such a hellish enigma to work for, Maddie thinks. Now Teddy wants presidential

candidate Reagan Clark on her show and to do it Maddie has to make nice with Mr. I'm-too-busy-for-you Brett Muenster.

As Maddie waits for Muenster to reappear, she scrolls through Reagan Clark's campaign website on her phone. It features the "I am an American patriot" talking points in bold caps that every conservative candidate needs to have these days, given their claim of the state as a holy church they repeatedly make, but Maddie notices something in Reagan Clark's eyes that defies political convention. Sure, her blonde, blue-eyed wholesome soccer mom look fits into the central casting rotation of Patriot 1 News, but Maddie sees in Reagan's eyes the hints of shadow. She sees something dark around the edges, threatening to ruin the picnic. It is a look Maddie knows well. Her father had it. And she has it, too.

Brett Muenster, on the other hand, looks like a Friday night cop shop mugshot. If Maddie hadn't known he was Reagan Clark's director of communications, she'd have thought this bald, dumpy man in round metal glasses was some minor accountant who fell on his sword for the thieving bosses now in the Caymans. Not so much a bag man, but stubbornly, or stupidly, loyal to a bad cause.

"Hey, sorry about that." Brett Muenster is back, and he isn't sorry. He smiles at Maddie with cold calculation. What is he calculating, she wonders?

"Sure," Maddie replies. "I know you're a busy guy and I appreciate your time. So, as I was saying, we'd love to have Reagan Clark come on the show and talk to Teddy."

Muenster grins. “We couldn’t get arrested by you guys this time last year.”

Maddie takes another breath, and wonders what would happen if she just tells him to go fuck himself and have Reagan Clark blather her holy America nonsense to Patriot 1 News? But she keeps her temper—the temper that she got from her Italian mother—under control.

She reminds Brett Muenster that this time last year, Reagan Clark wasn’t the overwhelming favorite to win the party nomination for president come July. And now, given the sharp three-way cleft in the American electorate, with Them and Us and Undecided, she might even win the presidential election come November.

Muenster chuckles in an ah-shucks kind of way. “I’m glad you folks at INN have noticed,” he says. Maddie can feel the “No thanks,” coming her way from Muenster and she is already framing the rejection to Teddy, who still might throw a water bottle at her head. But then Muenster says, with an unexpected smoothness, “How about I buy you a drink and we’ll discuss it?”

Maddie has not expected that invitation. But then he nods at her as if he approves of what he sees: Maddie’s long black curly hair, her alabaster skin, and regal nose – also from her Italian mother – her full lips regularly set in a cocky half-smile and her frank, green-eyed stare, which she got from her father. She’d look beautiful to an idiot. She also knows that Muenster is based in Houston.

“Yeah, I’ll be in New York later this week. There’s a bourbon bar I like in Hell’s Kitchen.”

Maddie bites her lip. The last thing she wants is to go

drinking with Reagan Clark's director of communications, because if someone snaps a pic of the two of them bonding over glasses of bourbon, it could zap her on social media in a pretty unpleasant way. On the other hand, if it will get Reagan Clark closer to Teddy, then it's worth the cost.

"Sure. I think I know the place. The Three Roses, on 39th. It's just down the street from my office."

Muenster snickers again. "Then I'd say it was destiny. How about 7 PM, Saturday?"

Teddy's show airs at 9 PM each weekday, but it is taped, so Maddie is usually free by 6. But she has a regular Saturday dinner date with her mother. "Would Friday work?" she asks. She will show up on Saturday if she has to, but she wants to gauge his confidence.

"I can do Friday," he says, still smiling. "See you there at 7. And we'll see where things go," he adds a little too confidently. Then he is gone.

Maddie shouts "Fucking hell!" at the window, and this outburst summons her supervising producer, Aretta Zayed, into her small office. Aretta is both Maddie's immediate boss and her fellow traveler on the show, though at five feet, she's about a foot shorter than Maddie and barely weighs in at 100 pounds. She has her black shiny hair cropped short and wears a slash of scarlet lipstick to dramatic effect, its shade of red made even brighter by the darkness of her skin.

Not only is Aretta smart and talented, but she is also gay and Black and Muslim, and that helps INN tick off all kinds of boxes on its diversity checklist. Maddie loves

her because they are on the same page politically. They believe that the founders of the country might want a refund if they saw how big money had corrupted their vision.

“You OK?” Aretta asks. Her voice is surprisingly deep for someone so small. She offers Maddie a bag of *chin chin*, a Nigerian dessert like mini deep-fried donut balls. Aretta likes to feed the office Nigerian sweets.

Maddie takes a couple of *chin chin*. “Yeah, sorry. I was just trying to get Reagan Clark on the show, and—”

“And?” Teddy Wright is suddenly looming in Maddie’s doorway. Teddy is like that, able to show up like a ghost at the feast. She is staring at Maddie like Wonder Woman, her black silk t-shirt and black leather pants matching her horn-rimmed glasses. Her blue eyes are electric with expectation, and her body, pushing 50, looks as if she has defied time and is at least a decade younger.

Even so, Maddie has seen Teddy look at her with jealousy. Maddie tries to tamp it all down, knowing that even her worn-in jeans and a paisley shirt under a blue blazer, her Italian-Irish beauty, with her black hair and emerald eyes, could somehow be an impediment to continued employment. After all, Maddie’s Oxford education is impediment enough.

“And,” Maddie says, “I am having a drink with her director of communications on Friday. To iron out the details.”

“No, you’re not,” Teddy replies.

Maddie’s pale cheeks flush. She has expected this

moment ever since her mother called in a favor with INN's owner and got her the gig when she came back to New York unemployed and broken-hearted from Oxford. It's the moment when Teddy says, "Favor's up, charity hire! Goodbye!"

But it's not that either. "You're not going to drink with that weaselly, sick-flirt fucker because Aretta is going to drink with him."

"I am?" Aretta will be having soda water on a Friday. A day known to her as Yawm al-Jum'ah. The Muslim Day of Assembly.

"And you, Dr. Lynch, are going to Rome."

Teddy always calls Maddie by her academic title when she wants to show her who's boss.

"I am?"

Teddy smiles at them with sudden maternal warmth, which Maddie has to appreciate as Teddy has no kids. Maybe she would have done if they could have been born fully formed at age 18. And if Teddy believed in love.

She steps into the office and shows Maddie and Aretta her iPhone screen. On it is the headline: "Pope Pius XIII will come to America in August." And a photo of the Catholic Church's first African pope.

Maddie's heart beats a dirge. She knows what's coming next.

"You speak Italian, right?"

"I do."

"And you lived in Rome, right?"

"I did."

"And your mother was a nun?"

“Almost. She met my father before her final vows.”

Teddy’s eyes shift into the past for a beat. “Your father was a great man.”

Maddie feels gravity pulling extra hard, tugging on her sadness: she still misses her father who really was a great man. And her famous journalist dad is the reason why she’s here, now, about to get a mission she dreads.

Teddy now smiles like the card player with a full house. “So you’re the perfect person to go chat up the Vatican. And get me a sit down invu with the Pope. When he’s here.”

Maddie knows it’s useless to say that Pope Pius XIII is not Pope Francis, who would talk to anyone. This Pope has never given an interview to the media because he has told the Vatican media crew that this is their job, and not his job. He’s to mediate between the world’s 1.3 billion Catholics and a pretty harsh God, as far as Maddie is concerned.

He is also, as Maddie knows the Church is fond of saying, a traditionalist, who believes that the purity of the Holy Mother Church must be preserved no matter what. Or so the cardinals who elected him thought. But then Pius suddenly went progressive on them, calling for dialogue with Islam and with the so-called liberal wing of the Church that loves gays and women and refugees. Pope Pius, from Nigeria, like Aretta’s mom, has turned out to be a surprising guy, which has made a lot of his old fellow traditionalists angry.

And so an interview is impossible. Failure: imminent. Still Maddie has to say – “OK, I can sort that out.”

Teddy holds up a dismissive hand. “Aretta, you look after the details. As for you, Maddie Lynch, just make sure you come back with a, how do you say ‘yes’ in Nigerian, Aretta?”

“That would be in Hausa. You say ‘ee’.”

“Eeeeeee!” Teddy trills. Then she smiles at Maddie like an executioner. “Just make sure there’s a ‘y’ and an ‘s’ bookending that Eeeee from the Popester before you come back, OK?”

Maddie returns the smile, but she feels her cheeks flush with anger. “Yes, Teddy. Unless he says it in Italian.”

Teddy looks at Maddie as if she has just slapped her, but then she bursts out laughing. And walks away, her laughter following her down the hall.

“Wow,” Aretta says. “The Pope is coming here. I wonder how his message of Muslim love will go down in the, uh, heartland of America? Where they all think we Muslims come out of the womb as suicide bombers.”

“And I bet that’s why the Pope is coming here, to get out that Muslim-love message. I just hope his press people have some Teddy-love,” Maddie adds. Right now she’d rather drink with Muenster than go to Rome. Which is saying a lot.

Aretta promises to ‘adjust’ the budget and get Maddie a comfortable seat in business class for the nine hour flight to Italy.

“Are you going to be OK Friday with the ‘sick-flirt fucker?’”

“Sure!” Aretta grins. “I am definitely not his type.”

“How’s Karin?” Maddie asks. She knows Aretta doesn’t discuss her private life much, but she did tell her that she was dating another woman who is also Black, gay and Muslim. Being a martial arts teacher as well, Maddie thinks, is worth bonus points.

“I broke up with her. But even so...” Aretta swipes her hands in the air—two people going in different directions.

“I’m sorry.” Maddie gives Aretta a hug. Her own heart takes a plunge for her friend; Aretta has a long list of boxes to check. And so meeting someone is hard. Getting a relationship going is almost impossible. Maddie knows.

After Aretta slips away, Maddie sits down, ready to call Muenster and tell him there will be a substitute for their drink. No, that would piss him off and maybe end the chance that Reagan might show up to spar with Teddy. Best to say nothing and go to Rome and deal with whatever shitstorm happens here.

She has not seen Rome since it was home. Behind the memory of the eternal city is one of her father, James Lynch, and the last time she saw him, which was in Jerusalem. He told her then, and he would tell her now, *“There’s nothing you can’t overcome with a big bottle of Jameson’s, a big gun and a big sense of humor. And always remember, no one gets out alive.”* She would count on that philosophy to get her through. As for the big gun, well, that’s what got her father killed on assignment for INN. He didn’t get out alive. And Maddie has no plans to die for Teddy Wright.