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"THE KEEPER OF THE SOUTHERN GATE"

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THE KEEPER OF THE SOUTHERN
GATE

by

Maurice Rowdon

S Y N O P S I S

THE KEEPER OF THE SOUTHERN GATE

A Suspense Novel set in Rome

by

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BACKGROUND: JAMES ELROY MERTON arrives in Rome from Richmond Va. after an absence of nearly twenty years. He was last in Rome at the age of about eighteen and fell in love with an English girl called Laura. They broke up after a short scene together but no other woman---including his wife with whom he lived in various parts of Virginia for over twelve years---meant as much to him as Laura. In fact she became his secret obsession over the years which occult practices served to strengthen. He was determined to see her again. His wife knew nothing about this. Nor did his friends. He never once wrote a letter to Laura, never once referred to her except in his secret incantations, never once received news of her. As the years went on he became convinced that she was still living in Rome, or had perhaps returned there after an absence. He swore to himself that he would one day look for her there. To this end he opened a special bank account in New York. His savings went into it over a period of at least ten years: he searched for fair means and foul to make easy money. His line was real estate and he found himself (to his satisfaction) in a racket which involved selling and reselling the same area of industrial land with increasing rake-offs, while the land itself remained unexploited. He also found himself suddenly faced by a possible malpractices indictment and was advised by those for whom he was the front-man to get as far from the USA as he could.

But before this happened his wife filed a divorce suit for neglect. For some time now he had been bestowing no sexual attentions on her, being increasingly fixed on Laura. He kept to his room for hours together, slept alone. He would recite an old Indian prayer to awaken a woman's love sometimes thirty or forty times in a day, waking up at intervals in the night to recite it in a whisper. His wife found him increasingly strange. They remained friends. You had to remain friends with James El, as everyone called him. He was a generous, big-shouldered, healthy looking man with cheerful alert eyes. In his mid-thirties he had the robust authority of a much older man, with the vigour of a younger. He had a habit of running the palm of his hand over his belly when he was particularly contented. You couldn't help but like James El. He ate and drank well, played tennis and swam. For ten years he and his wife Betty enjoyed a comfortable though not always exciting life together. They had two children,

neither of whom turned out delinquents. The house was large and comfortable. Betty knew he didn't consider himself above a crooked deal now and then. That was all right. She admired his coolness, his tact and sheer damned courage. He was used to money anyway, he'd always find a way out of a tricky situation. What she did mind was his growing aloofness, his hours alone in his room, his weekends alone at their shack in Maine. She would have preferred him to have an affair. Not that he changed outwardly. But he stopped petting her. When she asked him what had gone wrong he said, 'It's going right for the first time.' It was just like the wily bastard to say that.

Betty had married a very different James Elroy. For one thing he was the son of reasonably wealthy parents who were expected to leave him a lot of money. But they didn't die, and increasingly disapproved of their son. They urged him to abandon his shady deals to no avail. Real estate was his father's business too since he'd emigrated from Sussex, England, at the age of thirty and bought some land on speculation in Florida. In 1940 James Elroy was born--and given the Christian names of his father's favourite poet, James Elroy Flecker. His father possibly wanted him to turn out some kind of hero, and gave him as outdoor an education as possible. James El could ride and ski and glide and high-dive so well that by the age of twenty-five he was bored by all of them and started a paunch instead. Tricky real-estate deals weren't father's idea of heroism. When he taxed James El with this he replied, 'Listen, I like an element of risk in my life. If I didn't have that I'd die. Shit, I'm not going to sit around making a thousand bucks when with a bit of cunning I can make ten times as much. Anyway all business is crooked, you know that. They're going to ruin the land they buy for the next thousand years so why shouldn't they pay a price?'

His father laughed. But he stopped laughing when his son gambled away a good part of his fortune. He cut him off from his inheritance during his lifetime, which meant that his wife, or whomever James El elected to leave it to, would pick up the considerable remains of the fortune on his (James El's) death. As James El said when he heard the news, 'My dad's not so much hard as pig-headed.'

So the young James El with such brilliant prospects as an heir whom Betty married was all of a sudden no longer there. In his place was a well-to-do crook.

And a bit of an idealist---which was, if anything, worse. In his teenage Roman days he had been a communist. Italian communism in the Fifties was

quite different from the later militant, trade-union oriented variety. There was a lot of poverty still, and a group of ardent teenagers, most of them Italian, gradually influenced James El to believe that more injections of American capital into the country would throw it eventually into civil war and thus ruin Europe's 'little garden' once and for all. The industrialisation of the country, at that time in its early stages, should not be left in the corrupt and venal hands of DC politicians but proceed slowly and rationally on the basis of five- and ten-year plans. James El began to go to PCI meetings, and was frequently at the communist headquarters by the Palazzo Colonna.

At that time he was picking up good pocket money translating treatises and documents into English, and had a small apartment in the Via Margutta, its windows looking down into the courtyard of RAI headquarters. Here he gave small parties from time to time and came to know a good many ministry officials, partly through his translation work and partly because, being a potentially wealthy young American, he attracted a lot of social attention anyway. He found himself at most of the important vernissages and mixed with the artists of Via Margutta. He came to know a minister or two. The war had given the Anglo-Saxon a certain aura of authority and desirability in Italian eyes which still hadn't worn off. Italy was insular, law-abiding. Italians had not yet begun to travel. Smarting from feelings of inferiority due partly to the failure of fascism and partly to the survival of an agricultural system which had changed little since mediaeval times, the Italian looked on the foreign world (minus Germany) as entirely desirable and even wise. Combined with contempt for his fellow-Italians, this idealisation created a serious psychological imbalance which communism helped to breach.

James El had a good time in Rome. It was a life so unexpected, so different from anything he'd even dared to dream that he never wanted to leave. It saddened him to see that Italians wanted to become like everybody else and have 'gas stations along the Via Appia' rather than stay poor and bored in a little garden. And communism seemed to him the only way of giving Italy wealth while preserving the garden. He had discussions (even with the ministers, who listened only because he was American). They went on far into the night. His head was full of ideas. Rome was like a voluptuous village. Terrorism was unheard of. He strolled down to the little bar each morning to take his coffee with the RAI people. In those days a scuffle in the street would collect a crowd. Rome had its thieves but they were disciplined under known leaders, like

The Giant in the Campo dei Fiori. On the terrace of James El's apartment you could smell the fields outside the city when the wind was favourable. Later Rome's air pollution became as bad as Chicago's.

RALPH MARRIOT was one of his closest buddies in the old days. They were the same age and a day rarely went by without them seeing each other. Not that James El ever felt close to him. No one knew anything for certain about Ralph. He was supposedly English but never went near England. Where his money came from was anybody's guess but he never seemed short of it. In the night-long discussions he usually kept quiet, watching and listening amiably.

The discussions were brusquely cut off one day by a telephone call from the dreaded Questura, Mussolini's internal security police who were retained under the new constitution. Even James El's heart did a jump. He was told to go to headquarters at once and announce himself. He took a taxi, still unshaven, and to his astonishment was ushered into the office of the Questore himself. It wasn't the Questore himself but a high-ranking official: the point had been made though---he was considered important. For two hours the genial, lazily smiling official sat talking to him on the other side of a vast desk. Occasionally he put a question to him and at once cut short the answer with a casual, half-heard remark about its irrelevance. The gist of it was that James El had been trailed everywhere during the previous six months. He'd been seen visiting PCI headquarters several times, so had his girl (he was living with a student called Luciana---this at a time when you could still be fined L1000 for kissing a girl in the street). Now what was an American of his social status doing mixed up in all this? the official wanted to know. One could understand about the girl Luciana, she was Italian and therefore knew no better, and anyway she was a woman (any female driving a car or wearing trousers caused mirth in the streets of Rome). Wasn't James El a little young to get himself into what might be a very dangerous way of life? Shouldn't he return to the States and go to Harvard as his father wished him to? Did he understand that being a minor he could be sent back to the States at any time? Did he want that?

"We know all your movements," the official kept repeating.

At the end of the two hours James El heard the official say, "Now wouldn't you like to help your country?"

"How?"

"Well, you know a lot of our communists, I mean the top ones. You know the sympathisers who'd join

the party if ever it became powerful. They include a number of our civil servants, as you know. You speak fluent Italian. All useful stuff." Here he leaned forward. "Has it occurred to you that you could supply us with useful information? I can give you the name of someone at your embassy you could go and see."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You could earn a bit of money too---more than translations bring you."

At this James El simply smiled.

The result of this interview was that his soggiorno was cancelled and he was given 72 hours to get out of the country. The police told him his father wanted him back.

Just a month before this he'd met Laura, the blonde English girl who had Irish blood and could read hands and suddenly say "It's going to rain" shortly before it did.

James El's love-life was plentiful but extremely difficult. Enough to say that he was Virgo with Aquarius rising. The Aquarian wanted freedom at any price while Virgo was capable of pursuing a woman for years, decades if necessary until he got her.

He met Laura one warm midsummer evening at Vermicino in one of the cantine where they served cave-chilled frascati on old wooden tables. She was with Ralph and some students. James El sat there with her long after the others had left, and then they went walking in the dark lanes round Frascati. An uncanny recognition took place between them. It altered James El for life. Until then he'd taken his chance with girls, sometimes infatuated, often bored. Now he had a different feeling. He'd always been with this woman, would always be in the future whether they were physically together or not. It wasn't just falling in love. He was obsessed. He smelt her hair, the palms of her hands, and the touch, the smell were familiar from long ago deep in childhood and even beyond. They sat in a vineyard by the road kissing and fondling each other like people examining each other after a long, long separation. All they did was kiss and whisper about where she lived and where he lived and where they were born and things like that. They arranged to see each other next day in the Piazza Nazionale by the fountain. And then they drove back to Rome.

Next day she phoned him and said she couldn't make it. For a week he heard nothing. He had no idea where she lived. He spent that week trembling, hardly eating, sleeping fitfully and feverishly. He wandered the streets looking for her, called Ralph to find out if he knew anything about her but Ralph just shrugged his shoulders cheerfully and told him to try Perugia where she was studying Italian at the university, in the foreign students department. James El drove there and found her lodgings after searching through the university register. She wasn't there. "E a Roma", her landlady said, giving him a slow, smouldering, dark smile that meant she knew his business. He returned to Rome fit for suicide.

Looking into Laura's eyes was like looking deep into his own future after death. As a communist he had poor training for this kind of thought, and the experience found him entirely vulnerable and unprepared. Laura was hauntingly sensual too. She was voluptuous, marvellously soft to touch. He dreamed and dreamed about her, lying all day on his bed and jumping up frantically only to answer the phone. She never returned.

He left his apartment in Luciana's hands, furniture and all. Luciana had been exciting enough before Laura came along. Now he found himself unable to touch her. He expected never to have a really relaxed moment in his life again if he didn't find Laura. And in a way that was how it worked out.

He flew from Ciampino airport intending never to return to Rome and believing he could with time not precisely forget Laura but diminish the fever. He felt like a child all over again---needed the large cool parental house in Colonial Heights with the screens over the windows and a swimming pool behind the trees.

All his father said was, "Get yourself into a bit of trouble?"---then a chuckle and proud shake of his head.

It was being trailed at the age of nineteen, and the espionage offer by a high-ranking official, that gave James El his first taste of the sweetness of danger. It never left his system.

Back in Virginia he enjoyed long days at the pool with his new girlfriend Betty, who was in her first year at Sarah Lawrence, and he even thought he was in love with her. And he was bitterly angry with Laura, which made him believe he was finished with her.

Another couple of years and he married Betty, now out of college. He tried to forget that he'd enjoyed a life in Rome of a quality that made his present life seem flat and stale. Little nostalgic scenes kept coming to mind. Only one thing reconciled him to a marriage largely organised by his parents, and a home and a job: his secret determination to relieve the flatness of it all by leading a dangerous life, somehow, somewhere.

He looked around for risk all the time. And when he started up in real estate with an office of his

own he soon saw the possibilities. The shadier the client the better he liked him. And the clients were quick to realise this. He enjoyed clandestine meetings at roadside coffee houses. It excited him to employ investigation agencies. He began making money so fast that his father became alarmed. But Betty loved it. She persuaded him to buy a bigger house, and felt safe enough to get pregnant. They holidayed twice a year.

Only when the second child came along did he realise that he intended to return to Laura however many years it took him. He heard from Ralph occasionally, the slack, amiable, newsless letters you'd expect him to write. Nothing about Laura. He thought of flying to Rome to see her. But what was the use? You can't make a woman love you. At least this is what he thought for a long time. His crooked deals and countless girlfriends began to take precedence.

But then he met an interesting woman twenty years his senior who was said to have clairvoyant powers. They'd hardly been introduced when she told him he was in love with a woman far away with whom he'd been incarnated in many previous lives. He would one day return to her and realise a happiness with her which he'd never experienced with another woman.

"But she doesn't love me."

"She doesn't know she loves you. That's different."

It was she who gave James El his Indian love-incantation to recite. After that came hand-reading, the Tarot, various techniques of divination and finally magic itself, when he'd known her a year or more and shown himself an ardent pupil. He took to it like a duck to water. The secretiveness, the sense of a growing inner power that was quite invisible to the outside world was if anything more exciting than the crooked real-estate deals. It seemed to have just as much to do with danger. His personality changed. He was less irritable with Betty. He gave fewer parties. His marriage started going down, though it took a further five years to get to the bottom. Never once did Laura overhear him reciting the love-incantation, though she frequently stood outside his door listening. He could feel her approach. He performed lengthy ceremonies with magical accoutrements and vessels, within a circle chalked on his pinewood floor. He began to receive 'information' in a mediumistic way and increasingly foresaw future events. The confirmation of these flashes by later events gave him increasing confidence. He 'saw' that Laura was with another man but that the man wouldn't last long: and she wasn't in love with him.

He realised during those Virginian years that Laura had given him fantastic courage. He'd lost all fear of death, he'd laughed at threats of heavy fines or prison sentences. The women had fallen for him like skittles. You felt safe with James El---you shed your worries, those anxious worms that gnawed your inner life away. You felt free. His big presence made you feel you could change your life--- just by deciding to do so. Surprisingly, when you looked into his eyes expecting to find a genial, rather leonine expression suitable to the expansive figure and the weather-beaten face you found a pair of blazing, concentrated, obsessive eyes, with a touch of madness in them too.

After meeting the Richmond clairvoyant he began collecting books about clinical death. The literature wasn't all that extensive but every few months a new book on the subject emerged, even if it was just a rehash of the old ones. The word death changed its meaning for him. It now signified the most marvellous of all life's liberations, the culminative and totally satisfying one. In his liberation he was going to find Laura. In all his clinical-death reading he felt her hovering close to him, speaking to him through the words. Now he understood her. Now he realised why she hadn't turned up that day at the Piazza Nazionale fountain. How could she have loved the fool he'd once been---without occult capacities, without power of divination or prophecy or magical influence?

He got enormous pleasure from reading account after account of the death-experience by those who had been revived afterwards. 'I felt myself rise and so to speak emerge from my own body. I could look down on it, quite dispassionately, and hear what the nurses were saying. My feeling was one of unbelievable release and happiness, a floating sensation so perfect that nothing in my life before came near it. It was a feeling too of peace and I may say total self-fulfilment as if all my life had been an endeavour to reach this point. I resented bitterly being brought back to life. I wanted to cry. For days, weeks I yearned for that experience again. I never forgot it. Gradually I have realised I must wait my due time to die. Any fear of death I might have had before is unknown to me now. I look forward to that experience again with all my heart.'

And so, in an odd sense, did James El who had never experienced clinical death: but he looked forward to being with Laura. He realised she had guided his life, was still doing so. He felt her criticising certain things in him, encouraging other things. She helped him with the clairvoyance and the magic, deepening his character. In moments of self-doubt he thought he was inventing it all. This threw him into a state of unbearable restlessness. But soon he was once more 'living with Laura'.

He began planning his return trip to Rome. Breaking with Betty and even the kids wasn't going to be difficult because really it had already happened.

He'd saved up enough money to buy himself a lucrative business once he'd settled in Rome again. By no means a communist now, he informed himself about the American companies and subsidiaries in Italy, including the real-estate activities. Laura by this time had become his obsessive concern, haunting him day and night, and replacing all sexual activity. He had been warned too that celibacy was a powerful aid to the efficacy of magic.

He was sure that the incantation was working on Laura. About six months before he left the USA he began 'working' on her man so that she would be separated from him by the time he reached Rome.

And providence helped him get away even faster by tipping the police off about some of his crooked dealings. Recently he'd been sailing perilously close to the law in an effort to make ever bigger profits. Now he had to get out whether Betty liked it or not. The police investigations deteriorated the marriage even further so that (providence was very kind) getting out looked like the only sensible thing to do even to her. It was all going so nicely---until she plonked a legal injunction on him and got a nice fat settlement which absorbed most of his savings. Legal fees to protect him against an indictment, and generous 'gifts' to keep key people quiet, took care of the rest.

By the time he left for Rome he had just enough to keep him alive for six months---if he was careful. The year was 1978.

THE STORY:

1. He found a cheap room on a monthly basis in a hotel behind the Pantheon, a noisy district he'd never liked very much. By now Rome had become Italy's crime-city No 2 after Milan. Physically the centre of Rome hadn't changed but everything else had. The road to Frascati he had so often used in the old days was clogged with jerry-built tenement blocks. The weather seemed to have collapsed. It rained incessantly. People said you didn't get the old heat any more. It was just like any other European city now.

But he found his favourite Trastevere trattoria much as it had always been, only cleaner and the food better. There were many of the old faces, including Ralph's. Not that James El had any sense of homecoming. He was nervous, sometimes distraught, without knowing why. He hadn't written to Ralph to say he was coming. He strolled in unannounced and walked to the old table for ten places. Ralph looked astonished but within five minutes it seemed they'd been together all these twenty years. He had the sickening sensation that

these years had been lost---useless and pointless. The only excitement he found was in the thought that he was in the same city as Laura at last. As always Ralph was the perfect information-desk. After a lifetime of dolce far niente he was a dossier on everyone of importance in the city, its underworld too. Only he didn't know about Laura, or so he said. He'd lost touch with her. But he promised to find out all he could.

"For all I know she's married to a raisin merchant in Smyrna," Ralph said.

It seemed to James El that he looked foxy.

One evening he told Ralph he needed money and noticed an immediate change of expression on Ralph's face. His mind had begun to work fast. His eyes narrowed with calculation, gazing at James El across the table.

"What kind of work are you after?"

"Something with an element of risk."

He felt uncomfortable with Ralph but then he always had.

In a week a meeting was fixed up between James El and a Johnny Lucubrese at the Flora, downstairs in the bar. They strolled up to the Borghese gardens and Lucubrese instructed him to wait for a phonecall that evening from a man called 'Mike', who would do all the talking. After another week he was to inspect his bank account at the Banco di Roma.

'Mike' did phone and made a series of what sounded commonplace and casual remarks about meeting in Genoa, visiting 'my country place' and so on. A week later James El's bank balance was mysteriously credited with a thousand dollars.

James El knew well enough that he was becoming involved in some form of espionage and found himself excited rather than frightened. The new few weeks were quiet. He received a further thousand dollars but no more phonecalls. He knew he was being trailed and observed. Ralph kept a pretty close line on him too, and was with him most nights of the week.

Laura had been traced. She was married but lived alone in the 'ghetto' area. Her husband was called Marco Petrucci and known to be rather wealthy. They'd been together five years but had separated, though they were good friends and went to the same parties. James El asked anxiously if there'd been children and to his relief was told no. Ralph handed him Laura's address across the table one evening.

James El avoided getting to know other women in this interim period. He didn't want complications when he came to know and once more court Laura. He remembered a brothel in Via Monserrato from the old days. With the abolition of brothels it had become a small hotel much like the one he was staying in at

the Pantheon. You took a girl in from the street, or you booked one at the desk. James El found a sweet Neapolitan kid who curled softly all round him and worked him hard, and he would stumble back to his hotel feeling contentedly debauched as dawn came through. In this way sex desire was appeased and attachments avoided.

After a month Lucubrese met him in the gardens again and told him he must go at once to Zürich. He flew next day. The man who came to see him explained the code of the 'Mike' phonecalls. All had to be committed to memory, nothing must be on paper except a certain phone number in Rome. This was to be used only in an emergency. For instance, all 'Mike' phonecalls were in pairs---first the code messages, then a confirming call exactly one hour later that told him (in code again) that the first had been genuine. Unless he received this second call he was to treat the first one as fake and regard it as an emergency situation.

"Now when you call this number you'll be given another one, only you have to say who you are first."

"Who am I?"

"The keeper of the southern gate."

"What?" He nearly jumped in the air at this reference to one of the four 'gates' in the magic he practised. It was the most secret thing in his life---yet these people already knew about it!

"Only in an emergency is that your name," the other man went on, unaware of his astonishment.

"And who do I ask for?"

"Lord Michael."

"But that is the keeper of the southern gate!" he almost shouted.

Only back in Rome did he remember the sweet little Neapolitan girl asking about the gaudy robe she'd seen in his wardrobe (the one night he'd invited her back to his room), and his paternal explanation of the 'magic circle' with its north, south, east and west each in the hands of a different archangel. He began to suspect that this was a very powerful network indeed.

Ralph assured him that no terrorism was involved. James El would be asked to keep certain people under surveillance but this would be an entirely 'protective' role. The surveillance served to protect people threatened with murder or kidnapping. It provided Control with the weak links in their daily schedules and routines. They would be socially important people, and James El would be expected to live on their level. (James El had no objection to that, particularly as it was the only way he'd ever get to meet Laura 'by accident').

His first assignment came through. It was to observe and get to know personally a minister by the name of Lucchino Pietrafinio. 'Mike' gave him this name enclosed in a series of apparently chatty and harmless remarks which were in fact codes. Within a month James El must be on familiar terms with the

minister, within two in a position of entire confidence.

He was given a spacious apartment on the choice Aventine hill. Here he gave parties and once more became known as a desirable social contact. He found himself back in the fashionable restaurants of Parioli and the Via Veneto, less and less at the Trastevere trattoria. To his surprise Ralph joined him in his new life, indeed made him feel that his presence was part of the bargain. James El felt safer with him around---one never knew when one might not need a dirty trick or two.

He was now quite sure that Ralph had informed on him twenty years before. It explained why he was never short of money---and why the Questura hadn't booted him out of Italy as well. Had Ralph been in love with Laura? Something in Ralph's manner when he talked about her seemed to suggest a possible background there. Was that why he'd informed against James El, to get rid of him? And would he do the same again, given a second chance, particularly if Laura returned to their little circle? The Tarot cards supported this suggestion.

Well, Ralph had won the first round twenty years before. But James El was going to win the second. In the old days, he now felt, he'd deserved to lose. In the old days Ralph had been his master. But now Ralph was going to be his servant.

2) 'James El's back in circulation'---it went round Rome among those old enough to remember his 'wild' days twenty years back, about which they now laughed. With a middle-aged spread, a large apartment and a cook from the Trento he was excellent company.

One evening, at a party composed largely of Christian Democrats, he met Laura. They stared at each other. Her eyes widened almost with fear, then clouded. Within seconds they were continuing a whispered conversation which had been interrupted twenty years before.

A week later they dined alone at his place and made love all night; and all next day, in paroxysms of ecstasy that made all the other sex they'd had seem movements in a mime.

Gazing into her eyes for hours together he felt his body dissolving almost into death. Sometimes she seemed to be drawing him into that final ecstatic release he'd so often read about. And she'd been drawing him all these years, until now he was 'home'. He knew now why she'd become his lifelong obsession, his only reason for living.

They saw Aida together at the Caracalla and almost cried in the last scene when Aida and Radames were sealed in the underground tomb to die slowly in each other's arms.

To his secret astonishment Laura showed no aware-

ness of the role she'd played in his life. She told him that she'd failed to turn up for the Piazza Nazionale date twenty years back because he'd been too 'immature' for her. Yet she hadn't been happy without him either. Not that she'd thought much about him during the intervening years, much less yearned for him: but no other love affair had worked for her.

Equally to his secret astonishment he found that her clairvoyant activities showed no development: that is, she hadn't particularly studied the matter in the intervening years or sought a 'master' as he had. She read hands still, did the cards as he did. It was just a natural thing for her, as simple as breathing.

Now it was her turn to recognise powers in him. She suddenly saw the man she'd always wanted to have and inwardly pined for without knowing it. She joined him in his magic rites, took instruction from him. She was madly, unbearably in love.

At another Christian Democrat party he met her husband, Marco Petrucci, a quiet man with rather stunning good looks, very masculine and steady. Not necessarily strong though, James El thought; and apparently quite oblivious of the unearthly powers he'd married in Laura. James El couldn't understand why people didn't swoon when they gazed into her eyes. How could they stand about the room unaware of those uncanny, haunting glances?

He inspected his account at the Banco di Roma each month and found it replenished on time. He bought a car and drove Laura out to Ostia Antica, Frascati, Palestrina, all the old places. Simultaneously he was going about his business of surveillance, often with Laura in his company---at rigged dinner parties, evenings at the Florida club. Daily he provided details of the minister Pietrafino's movements, and consigned them to a black plastic sack in a rubbish dump among the tenement blocks of Monte Mario.

Just before the two months of his assignment were up the minister was shot dead in his car on his way to the Quirinale. There were press photos of him hanging from the driver's seat.

James El, his face flushed with anger, ran to the phone and called Ralph. "Some people never will learn

not to do the same things every day" was Ralph's reply. In other words, Pietrafino had disregarded the warnings of the protective outfit of which James El was part. "We knew he was for it," Ralph added. It sounded altogether too naive for words but James El found himself swallowing it.

Then came an unexpected phonecall from 'Mike'. It was a new assignment. James El knew better than to answer back over the phone. The confirming phonecall came within the hour. It found James El trembling violently. His next assignment was Marco Petrucci, Laura's husband.

He then broke the most sacred rule of his trade, namely to reveal an assignment to living mortal. He could feel a tremor of white-hot terror go through Ralph as he did so. But he deliberately burdened him with it---in case Ralph didn't know already. It turned Ralph into a fellow-conspirator with as much to lose as he did.

Laura's husband was a wealthy and influential man close to high-ranking Christian Democrat officials and known to have helped architect the famous compromesso storico or 'historical compromise' between the Christian Democrats and the communists which ex-prime minister Aldo Moro and pope Paul VI had crowned with respectability.

James El took an even more dangerous step. He told Laura to find a way of warning Marco to vary his daily routines and continue varying them each day.

Marco Petrucci began coming to his apartment quite regularly. He knew about James El's affair with Laura and didn't seem to mind (he was living with another woman himself). He liked James El a lot. He invited him without Laura sometimes. They went hunting in the Pisan hills though James El refused to fire at young wild boar so domesticated that they all but came up to him to be scratched. When they were alone together in one of the chalets, sipping cointreau, in candlelight, he tried to tip Marco off but it didn't work.

He observed Marco Petrucci more than he'd ever observed a human being in his life, clinging to the fiction that his role was protective. Each day he left careful detailed reports in the plastic bag at Monte Mario. He used Laura in a way that was bitterly distasteful to him, and resolved one day to let her in to all his secrets.

Marco was in the habit of flying to Palermo on business in a company-helicopter about once a month. One evening he told James El over the phone that he was going down there the following day. James El made sure not to include this piece of information in his report that same night.

Next day the helicopter crashed with Marco in it. There was no explosion. The story was that the pilot had died of heart failure. Marco was killed instantly.

Laura came to James El with the news that Marco had left her everything, his lawyers had just phoned her. The family would contest it but as she was still Marco's legal wife they hadn't a chance. She was now

a rich woman.

She now of course realised that James El had known more about Marco's dangerous situation than she'd thought. That night, strolling up and down a deserted lane on the outskirts of Frascati, he told her everything. She said she'd had a 'brief and unpleasant' affair with Ralph some years back, and that it had indeed been Ralph who'd torn his character to shreds behind his back twenty years before. And she'd been weak enough to believe him.

ELI (L'Esercito della Liberazione Italiana) claimed the murder, as they'd claimed that of the minister Pietr^offino. James El blamed himself bitterly for these deaths but again allowed Ralph to persuade him that his role was protective. "After all," Ralph said with the hint of a menacing look, "didn't you and Laura both try and warn him in advance but he didn't take any notice?"

3) The following week ex-prime minister Moro was kidnapped. James El suddenly saw a design behind it all: one by one the negotiators of the famous compromesso storico were being hit. Now the top ones (Moro and the pope) were to go.

In that case why hadn't he been put to watch Moro instead of two relatively unimportant men? Socially he would have been in an ideal position to do so, and had met Aldo Moro frequently at receptions.

His blood went cold one morning when he discovered from the Tarot cards that he was marked out for even bigger game.

The new instructions came on a grey afternoon of scirocco when all Rome was looking irritable and sallow-faced. He worked at the coded messages for much of the night and finally had to face the fact that he'd been given the pope as his third assignment.

'Mike' emphasised that James El was being called on not to watch pope Paul VI or any particular pope but the pope whoever he should happen to be at the time. He sat puzzling over this.

The pope's tastes in food, his eating times, his rising and retiring habits, the hours he spent in his library etc had to be kept meticulously up to date. This was necessary because the pope moved about so little.

James El heard rumours among journalists at the Florida club that there was a Red Brigades plan afoot to kidnap the pope, only Wadi Haddad, the PLO leader of the German-Palestinian terrorist network of which the Red Brigades were said to be a part, refused permission. The pope had been under close surveillance on and off for the past two years, ever since the raid on OPEC headquarters in Vienna. The first plan to kidnap the pope had been as early as 1975 after the seizure of the Berlin politician Peter Lorenz.

James El began going to the Vatican receptions.

He came to know several highly placed Vatican officials, more particularly Monsignor Salvatore whose knowledge of the pope's personal habits was greater than most other people's, and anyway they liked each other. James El was shown the papal apartments and even the private apartments where usually only secretaries and personal attendants penetrated. In the evening he did scale maps of these quarters and carefully deposited them in the plastic bag.

But he was now convinced that Ralph was his Control, and that the outfit he was working for was anything but protective. Therefore Ralph was his enemy.

He determined from now on to draw up two kinds of report, a true one which he kept in his own files, and a false one which he deposited in the plastic bag (though maps etc naturally had to be straight). He meant to infiltrate the Vatican to the same extent as the man or men who intended to murder the pope as Pietrafino and Marco Petrucci had been murdered. He would cover all their traces and seek to undo them. He focussed his attention particularly on the papal kitchen and the papal medical services, watching for new or suspicious recruits. He believed that the method chosen would be delayed-action poison, administered in a harmless-seeming injection.

He and Ralph watched each other with demoniac concentration. It became usual for Ralph to pop up at all the same Vatican receptions.

James El's apartment was 'visited' but he could get nothing out of his Trento cook. Since this man had come with the apartment he surmised that he too was under Control.

He began to fear Ralph's sudden appearances--- at restaurants where he was dining with Laura, even at têtes-à-têtes with Monsignor Salvatore.

The Moro affair ended in May 1978 with the ex-prime minister's murder. It was a terrific shock in Rome. James El's income was raised in the first days of June.

The time came for pope Paul VI to retire to his palace at Castel Gondolfo for the dog days, according to custom. James El now knew various of the Swiss and Palatinate guard officers. Paul VI's had been a long reign and habits had established themselves firmly. Paul had never evoked much personal warmth. James El remembered his coronation over twenty years before. Paul's austerity of manner had kept people at a distance. An up-to-date portrait of him was beginning to emerge. The pope felt rather fragile these days. Surprisingly, given his long experience of public affairs, he was becoming increasingly shy. He made several references to his own death in speeches. The Moro affair depressed him deeply.

Rumour said that it had become impossible to kidnap the pope not only because of Haddad's disapproval

but because of the physical difficulties of taking a man who rarely moved outside the Vatican walls, and that for this reason Moro had been substituted for him.

This thought too may have tortured the pope. Moro was after all one of his best friends. Paul VI seemed to feel increasingly isolated, and played his favourite Vivaldi until late at night alone in his room. After Moro's body was found in the back of an abandoned car he was given two heart-stimulant injections.

The summer was unusually hot and pleasant and James El spent a lot of time with Laura on the beaches of Fregene, like most of Rome's professional classes.

It was there that he learned that the pope had been confined to his bed at Castel Gondolfo with arthrosis, an old complaint of his. He'd suffered two bouts of influenza this year. But his doctors felt no cause for anxiety.

James El raced to Castel Gondolfo to discover if there had been sudden recruits on the papal staff, but nothing had changed. He felt he was fussing unduly and returned to the beach. He now let Laura into all his anxieties, and even showed her the two reports, one true and one false, which he prepared each day, so that she would see he'd chosen the protective role whether Ralph liked it or not. Sadly she said, "He has both of us in his hands now."

Suddenly, on Sunday August 6, Vatican radio announced that the pope was gravely ill. A few hours later and he was dead. He died at 9.40 that evening, a matter of hours after the first announcement. For James El it was a typical delayed-action death. To conceal such a murder in the case of an old man was easy as no post-mortem would be thought necessary. There was the telltale bloodclot. The pope had been given intensive treatment, and oxygen, but the bloodclot on the lungs, or pulmonary edema, had complicated the matter fatally. His condition had suddenly 'worsened' in the afternoon but no one seemed to know for sure what had happened. Monsignor Pier Pastore described it as a 'cardiac crisis' and not an infatto, which would have been the right word for 'heart failure'. Monsignor Giuseppe Caprio, the pope's Under Secretary, said in a Vatican broadcast that he hadn't expected so quick an end.

James El's conviction that despite his vigilance the Vatican had been infiltrated was strengthened by the fact that the day after the pope's death the German magazine Der Spiegel published (August 7 1978) Hans Joachim Klein's account of the Red Brigades' plan to kidnap the pope. According to Klein, Wadi Haddad had said that no Arab country could officially let anyone run around free who had kidnapped a pope. It would have had to be a 'suicide' operation. So the plan had been dropped. James El knew that the Germans had tipped off the Italian government that 'something big' was coming up before the Moro kidnapping. It was clear to him that German defectors from the 'Carlos' network had leaked a lot of information

recently. The article's private message to James El was that the attempt on the pope had been switched from kidnapping to poisoning, and that this had succeeded, only no press article could say so. He became obsessive in his desire to get the infiltrator out of the Vatican as quickly as he'd got in, and increasingly he saw that infiltrator, whoever he was, as Ralph's man.

He was convinced too that the killer was still there, and intended to remain there after the next papal election.

'Mike' phoned him to order intensified surveillance from the moment the next pope was elected. But James El resolved to save the new pope's life if he possibly could by systematically working against Mike's instructions while seeming to abide by them.

This helped his conscience considerably. Together with Laura he performed magic rites to ward off danger and convert it to good. They worked on divination together and were perplexed by the repeated prognostication of 'utmost happiness' combined with 'utmost doom'.

Considering James El was in effect a squalid informer (less even than a spy) and Laura was in connivance with him though it had cost her husband his life, it was remarkable what serene happiness they achieved together. They were the envy of Rome's morbidly promiscuous couples.

2.

4) The Conclave was a brief one. Pope John Paul 1 was elected on August 26, less than three weeks after the former pope's death.

James El now closed a clever social net round the new pope, insinuating himself into Vatican receptions given by the cardinals, press conferences etc. He did this quite openly. His friends were amused. James El was going catholic. Some said they'd always expected it.

John Scales was his most informative catholic contact at the Florida club. After a time no one thought it strange that James El should be avid for every scrap of papal gossip he could get.

Pope John Paul 1 was causing distress in the Vatican. He dispensed with the papal tiara and said he would no longer travel in the wooden throne held shoulder-high by attendants which made it possible for thousands to see him. In front of journalists he replaced the traditional royal 'we' with 'I'. At first the Curia insisted on issuing the texts of his speeches with the usual 'we' but finally had to give way. The whole city was now talking about 'the censored pope'.

Also the pope entered and left audiences at a smart trot, in defiance of tradition. Cardinal Felice, acting dean of the Sacred College, was sent to see him to request that he 'curb' his behaviour. James El pricked his ears up at this. A murder-faction could so easily germinate from circumstances like these. Would the work of the infiltrator be made that much easier by deliberate negligence in the matter of the pope's security?

At the Hall of the Consistory, addressing the 88 cardinals who were still in Rome, the pope abandoned the set speech which referred to the indebtedness of the entire Church to the Roman Curia, and casually said instead, "As soon as I had a little time, the first thing I did on becoming pope was to get hold of the Annuario Pontificio and study the organisation of the Holy See."

And the pope renominated Cardinal Jean Villot as Secretary of State despite Villot's bitter critics in the Curia. Most important of all perhaps, he suddenly

cut the 'bounty' given to members of the Curia on the election of a new pope by half, so that they got \$250 instead of \$500.

James El found an appalling lack of security round the pope which he himself tried to supply in a desperate attempt to save him: for he was every day more convinced that pope John Paul 1 wouldn't last long. The pope's only contact with the outside world once he'd gone to bed was a bell-push, and the nearest duty aide was beyond calling distance. The chief papal physician, Professor Renato Buzzonetti, who worked at a Roman hospital and not inside the Vatican, could declare himself unavailable even in an emergency, and in any case it took him at least half an hour to reach the Vatican.

At this point Ralph contacted Laura secretly and told her that he'd known about James El's false reports since her husband Marco had phoned him the evening before his death to tell him that he would be flying to Palermo the next day and James El had suppressed this information in his next report. "Unfortunately for James El your husband told him by phone and not person to person," he added. "Now I need the real information, Laura, and I'm going to get it. James El is alive today because we need to know what he's up to. If you don't provide me with his true report each day he's a dead man in a week."

Foolishly she said nothing about this conversation to James El, fearing for his life, and secretly consigned a copy of his true report each day to another black plastic bag behind the Piazza Navona.

Meanwhile James El was increasingly obsessed with the idea that the pope was shortly to be murdered.

There was an event that seemed to him an evil portent. On September 6 Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad, a senior of the Russian Orthodox church, collapsed and died during an audience with John Paul 1 at the age of only 49.

Although James El knew well that this death was due to natural causes the incident served to spur him to a bold effort to discover the date for the pope's liquidation. For once he answered 'Mike' back on the phone and demanded to know if 'zero-hour' had been set on this operation. If so, he must know it, as there were signs of 'counter measures' being taken at the Vatican to foil the possibility. The pause at the other end of the line he took for alarm. Then the line went dead. After another hour he was told that three dates had been set---September 17th, 18th and 28th. The bell-push at the pope's side would be put out of action, and it was James El's duty on these three dates to see that the aide on duty in the papal apartments was distracted and harrassed at the time the pope usually went to bed. To squeeze out of him the manner of the death James El asked 'Mike' whether the infiltration of the Vatican was 'medical' or otherwise since (another lie) there was particular vigilance going on at the Vatican about new medical staff. The answer was yes, a doctor would examine the pope a few hours before his bedtime on one of the set dates.

He eliminated the dates September 17th and 18th. That was where his Tarot cards came in useful. All was set for the 23th.

5)

C H A P T E R S A M P L E

It was to happen tonight. He almost fell up the softly carpeted stairs to the Florida club to hear what Scales had to say. A woman from Paris Match was talking to him but no woman stayed with Scales the whole evening unless she was new to the club or, like Scales, queer.

After a few minutes Paris Match moved away to another date in the corner.

James El kept thinking of Laura and how they were meeting in an hour at Florio's, before going to a reception in the Borgia apartments.

All was safe if the pope had received no medical visits during the day. James El was pretty sure he hadn't.

He realised that Scales was already talking.

"He could be heard all the way down the corridor. They drove him to the point of no return."

"Heard all the way down the corridor?"

"He had a God Almighty row."

"Who?"

"The pope."

He picked Laura up without stopping for a drink and entered the Vatican by the Arch of the Bells. The Swiss guards hardly looked at him and he parked in the tiny Piazza Santa Marta.

The hot weather had broken and Rome was back to damp and chill. Thick low clouds overhead glowed with a kind of rosy ominousness.

Other guests were arriving, mostly in black, Rome's colour.

All the chandeliers were on in the Borgia apartments and the babble of talk was loud. He

left Laura in the care of one of Marco Petrucci's brothers and walked to the lavatory as he'd arranged with her that morning. She was to remain at the party just twenty minutes, then leave alone, taking the car.

He was hardly out of the room when Ralph touched Laura's arm from behind and drew her aside.

He didn't even lower his voice.

"You know I've been covering for him all these months? He wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for me. Now either you tell me what he's up to or I'm withdrawing my support and you know what that means."

"He's gone to see Salvatore."

Ralph was out of the place at once--- a shadow suddenly gone.

The lavatory was within easy access of Raphael's Loggias. James El had worked it all out the evening before. He hurried along with the Belvedere courtyard below on his left, its many windows glittering. All at once he was looking down into the San Tomaso courtyard. He'd reached the papal apartments.

To get to the private apartments from here was considered impossible---but only by those in charge of papal security.

He nodded to the guards in the Pontifical Hall and passed through the Hall of the Swiss Guards. Then came the Canton Hall with its friendly picket of Palatine guards, one of whom asked him the time. The Hall of Tapestries and the Hall of the Noble Guard were empty.

He was suddenly in the Tronetto or Small Throne Room. After that came the library where popes were said to spend most of their days. The hush and the attentive guard outside showed that indeed the pope was there.

He asked the guard in a whisper for the way to Monsignor Salvatore's quarters. The man showed considerably astonishment at his sudden appearance and wanted to detain him until one of the officers

came forward with an easy smile.

"I'd give anything to see the pope's apartments first," James El whispered.

The officer looked round in silence.

"Come with me," he said.

They reached the pope's bedroom in a few moments and as he stood in the doorway he felt pity for a man who could enjoy so little privacy and yet so little protection.

"Suppose somebody wanted to kill the pope tonight?"

The officer pointed to the window. "No way of access. And as for this way---" indicating the corridor behind him---"we'd be all over him inside five seconds."

"Is that a bell-push?"

"Yes."

"Could the wire be cut, do you think?"

Together they began tracing the wire to its wall-fixture.

At that moment there was a movement of the guards outside. The pope was preparing to leave the library. They closed the bedroom door and sped along the corridor towards Monsignor Salvatore's private study.

James El entered the study flushed and nervous and the guard officer went away with a slight bow.

Salvatore was nodding asleep at his desk after a good dinner.

"Did you ensure that no doctor visited the pope today?" James El asked him.

"How could I prevent that?" Salvatore said with a great shrug.

"A doctor saw him for God's sake?"

"Yes."

"Did he give him an injection?"

"I've no way of telling but it's always possible." He gazed at James El for a time. "Your conjectures are very wild, Merton. Our security's much better than you think." He put a drink in James El's hand.

"You're like so many converts, you want a crusade even when there's no one to fight. I know about your concern for the pope, I appreciate it but believe me there's no danger to his person. As to the possibility of pope Paul VI having been poisoned I've been into all that and there isn't the slightest suspicion surrounding his death."

"Let me at least warn the duty aide, let me do it personally and you can tell him I'm crazy afterwards if you like, but I must talk to him!"

"I do undertake to talk to him."

"Remember, the pope must be within his earshot all night. It may happen tonight. But it may have happened already!"

Salvatore started to smile but in respect for his nervous state just shook his head.

"Go back to the reception," he told him, "and we'll see what happens."

"But are emergency medical arrangements available tonight? The least we can do is to ensure that!"

Salvatore wasn't to be roused. "How can I put my nose into the pope's medical arrangements, Merton?"

"Even if he dies as a result of not doing so?"

"Do you really want people here to think me a lunatic?" Salvatore asked him.

"But I've got evidence---all I ask you to do is investigate it---!"

"Merton"---sharply now---"I've done a check on the medical arrangements and the security arrangements and nothing's different from what it has always been."

"But that's the whole trouble!" James El cried with a pained face.

"How can I insist again and again on alerting people who are already fully alert?"

"I don't believe they are fully alert!"

Again the vast shrug: "It's your belief against mine."

"Then do you mind if I talk to the medical staff?"

"There's no way I can allow that. Not only would

they think you mad, they'd turn you over to the police as a suspect." Salvatore leaned forward with a certain grimness in his southern eyes. "If the Red Brigades or the ILA have intentions of this kind, how is it that a man of your social position knows about them?"

"A lot of reliable talk comes my way."

"And a lot of damned silly gossip comes mine," Salvatore said with a sort of final rudeness.

As James El left the room he heard the Monsignor saying behind him, "And give a thought to your own security for a change!"

He walked into the dimly lit Piazza Santa Marta, still within the Vatican walls, and noticed with relief that his car had gone.

A few guests were trickling out of the reception, those who went just to show official faces and then return home to a good dinner.

He had an hour left at most. It was eight o'clock.

He reckoned that an injection administered in the afternoon, after the pope's siesta, would be taking effect at ten or eleven that evening.

The only man he knew personally who could influence medical staff at the Vatican was a Professor Lepezanno who while he had no professional connection with the Vatican was well-placed to be taken seriously there at any time of the day or night.

The trouble was that James El had no address. But he knew the hospital where he sometimes operated. It stood close to the Sant' Angelo bridge, within walking distance of St Peter's.

The Swiss Guards at the Arch of the Bells nodded to him pleasantly, and he walked into St Peter's square with his hands in his pockets.

He kept under the Colonnade, in the shadows, turning to glance behind him every now and then.

There were few people about in the damp brisk air, and anyway these days Rome imposed an unofficial curfew on itself.

He saw a car parked on the far side of the square, at the opening of the Via della Concilazione, one of several cars---but after months of practice he had an eye for what boded no good.

He approached it hidden, still keeping to the shadows, and recognised Johnny Lucubrese at the wheel. He began to think better of walking the whole length of the Via della Concilazione to the hospital with that car behind him.

He had a feeling he might end at the hospital as a dying man if he did so.

He stopped, waiting for the right decision.

Then he walked not into the Via della Concilazione but the Piazza Argentina where the debris from the day's market made concealment easier and he could slip round the sidestreets to join the road to the hospital later, where he'd then be behind Lucubrese.

To his surprise it worked. The schmuck was still sitting at the wheel gazing towards St Peter's when James El emerged several hundred yards behind him.

He turned into the vast depressing foyer of the hospital with its smell of hopeless humanity.

He found a young doctor vaguely connected with Lepezanno on the second floor. They stood in a brightly lit surgical theatre. The doctor picked at the operating bed with his right hand, faintly apprehensive at the sudden appearance of a well-dressed stranger with an American accent.

"I've been trying to get him all evening," James El murmured as urbanely as possible. "I expected to see him at the Vatican reception just now but he wasn't there and Monsignor Salvatore couldn't give me a clue as to where he might be except here of course."

The 'reception' bit worked. In these days when everybody scorned class they were still sensitive to the old heady perfume of social power when it was put under their noses.

The doctor left the room and returned almost

at once. "Would you like to come with me? I have him on the phone."

It took some time for Lepezanno to place him but then 'a friend of Laura Petrucci's' worked---there'd been enough gossip about that to keep James El on the social files for another decade.

"This is very urgent indeed," he said after the young doctor's back was turned. "It concerns the safety of the pope. I have to talk to you right away."

"Can you come here? I've just started dinner but that's OK."

"I'll get a taxi, this isn't the best place to find one but---"

"Do you mind travelling in an ambulance?"

"I don't care what I travel in," James El told him.

"Give me back the doctor."

A few moments later and James El was hurrying downstairs to the ambulance park at the back. He jumped in where the stretchers usually went and sat by the empty bed, then with a sound of sirens the vehicle swept out into the one-way riverside highway towards Trastevere.

They would have to cross the river as soon as possible and then retrace their route on the other side to get to Parioli where Lepezanno lived.

The ambulance sw^ept smoothly and perilously along, with maximum siren coverage. The driver must have been told that it was top urgent.

The snag was that if the driver killed himself James El had no address to go to.

To his surprise they didn't turn into the four-laned highway on the other side of the river, which would have taken them to Parioli in a few minutes, but cut across the Piazza Farnese to the crowded Via Vittorio Emmanuele where they could expect a traffic hold-up.

But instead of taking that road they cut through the sidestreets behind Piazza Navona.

Clearly the driver had been instructed not to take an obvious route.

They had just turned into a small square close to the Cancelleria when a car dived out of a narrow street at the side and almost got them head on. The ambulance skidded to a stop and he fell head first to the floor.

He yelled to the driver, "Keep moving!"

At once they accelerated with sirens sounding.

He could swear that the car had been Johnny Lucubrese's.

It was now behind them. And being driven with frantic determination.

It cut past them again, and once more tried to cut them off, but the road was wider than before and with a blast of sirens the ambulance swerved round it and into the Piazza Navona, where traffic was barred.

This was an unwise move. There was only one exit from the square and the other car was waiting.

James El's hand was on the ambulance door, ready to push it open if he had to jump.

The ambulance took the other car full on and skidded sideways down the sidestreet before crashing into the wall. The other car looked as if it had been almost dissected but two men jumped out.

He pushed the ambulance door open and jumped. He ran into the square again and realised that this was the most stupid thing he could have done because there was no cover and no passing traffic.

He dashed across the square between two fountains, hoping that these would conceal him.

The two men were waiting for him at one of the exits from the square so he veered round, racing along madly, and made for the Via Vittorio Emanuele which was at least busy.

One of the men was only a few yards behind him as he dashed across the busy street without looking left or right. Traffic skidded to a halt. There were cries of alarm behind him but the two men

were safe.

His breath was giving out. A busy social life was no preparation for this kind of thing.

He dashed up a sidestreet towards Campo dei Fiori and realised he was going to lose.

They jumped on him from behind in the Piazza Farnese and all three fell to the ground. Then they pulled him towards the narrow and forbidding Via dei Pellegrini with pedestrians hurrying away on all sides.

Once inside the street, which was rarely if ever patrolled by the police, they once more dragged him to the ground and forced something over his mouth.

Close on dawn the next day he woke up, still huddled in the same spot, frozen stiff. It took him over an hour to stagger home in the gloomy light of another cloudy day.

Shutters were being pulled up, café tables being hopefully set out. Twenty years ago those sights and sounds had been ones of happiness.

They hadn't so much as gr^ezed his skin.

When he walked into his apartment Laura was taking a call from Scales.

"There's big trouble over at the Vatican," Scales told him. "I don't know what it's all about but only death could cause that much activity."

Only at midday did Radio Vatican announce that pope John Paul 1 was dead after a reign of only thirty-three days.

6) He knew he had to hide, get away. They wouldn't be giving him a second chance. They'd rerieved him because his murder on the same evening as the murder of the pope might have given the police interesting clues. These clues could have led to Ralph in the end.

It was Friday, 29 September. Rome was in uproar. Almost no one believed that John Paul 1, a manifestly healthy man of only 65, had died naturally. The pope's brother, in Australia at the time, told the press that John Paul had recently had 'some bad feelings round the heart' but a medical check had found no cause for alarm. Father Rinaldo, in the pope's village of birth, said that as far as he knew the pope had never suffered from heart trouble. Monsignor

Giuseppe Rosa, Apostolic Administrator in Venice, said he'd been received in audience only two days before and the pope had appeared in good health. The pope's own physician, who had also seen him a few days before, had found him normal.

The official story was that he'd been found at 5.30 am by his private secretary Father Magee, who had knocked on the pope's bedroom door and not getting a reply looked for him in his private chapel. No one was there either, so he returned to the bedroom and opened the door. The light was on and the pope was in bed with The Imitation of Christ still in his hand. The pope's face was turned slightly towards the right and bore a smiling expression.

Doctors calculated that he'd had a massive heart attack at ten or eleven o'clock the previous evening, Thursday 28 September.

That week there were two Red Brigades murders in Rome. Also Aldo Moro's will, extracted from him by terrorists with the promise of his eventual release, was published, revealing his horror at the indifference shown to his fate by his own political party. It added to the general gloom.

By October 1 the Vatican was under considerable pressure to hold a post mortem. Then came a bit of news that James El was waiting for. It said that one doctor had examined the pope only five hours before his death and reported him fit.

Why had emergency medical assistance been absent from the papal apartments? the papers asked. That was another bit of information he was waiting for too. He seethed, pacing up and down his room, with Laura urging him to keep calm.

The call for a post mortem came mainly from a rightwing Catholic group called Civiltà Cristiana, which asked for the 'true causes' of his death to be investigated.

Only one simple examination of the body had been carried out so far. This was considered sufficient basis for the Vatican's claim that the pope had died after a heart attack from natural causes. The College of Cardinals announced that it had no intention of having the pope's body further examined.

Civiltà Cristiana furnished the Questura with a report summarising the suspicious circumstances surrounding the pope's death.

Apparently the pope had prepared for bed at ten o'clock on Thursday evening. All that was officially said by the Vatican was that on being given the news that a left-wing Roman youth had that day been murdered he had replied, "Even young people are killing each other now..." These were said to be his last words. James El calculated that he had been to all intents and purposes dying himself at this time.

There were claims that the Vatican statement on the circumstances of the discovery of the pope's body had been false. The pope had in fact been found by the nun who brought him his morning coffee.

The coffee remained untouched in his room, so she knocked on his bedroom door. Through the keyhole she saw him lying dead. She then called Father Magee.

The Vatican denied this.

Asked if they suspected foul play, Civiltà Cristiana announced, 'We have our information which we have placed in the hands of the judicial authorities.' Later its spokesman Dr Franco Antico said, "We aren't necessarily saying anything criminal happened. But there are many suspect facts and the situation isn't clear."

It took James El some time to get hold of the Civiltà Cristiana document. It supported in precise detail all his findings before the pope's death, except in the matter of that final visit from a doctor. He checked through Scales about that visit and found that in fact the pope hadn't received an injection. So on that particular matter he'd been on a false trail. But all the other facts fitted.

By October 8 rumours and gossip were still hot on the subject. All Rome got hold of the report in some form or another and embroidered it. Poison was the favourite suggestion. Suicide was another, enforced suicide another.

Many people felt that prompt action on Thursday evening could have saved the pope but there had been a deliberate withdrawal of emergency medical facilities.

Still nobody in the Vatican explained why it had taken them two hours after the doctors' final confirmation of the pope's death to announce it to the public.

Cardinal Silvio Oddi told the press, "We know for certain that the death of John Paul 1 was because his heart ceased to beat due to natural causes."

No one doubted that his heart had ceased to beat or even that he'd had a heart attack, but certainty in the matter of 'natural causes' without an autopsy was fatuous.

In fact an autopsy was hurriedly carried out--- or so it seemed. Scales suddenly tipped James El off about this, the evening before the funeral. Despite Laura's begging him not to go out, least of all to the Vatican area, he raced over to St Peter's in time to see attendants ushering away the crowds who were about to file past the pope's body, while six white-smocked medical men entered the basilica from the area of the sacristy and moved towards the bier.

The following evening he went to a Vatican reception, trembling slightly and looking distinctly strange, but managed to extract no information from any of the guests about the findings of the autopsy.

No Vatican statement was issued on the subject.

James El prepared to leave Italy with Laura, with great secrecy of course.

But before this happened he had himself received into the Church. Then he confessed his activities

of the past few months to Monsignor Salvatore who looked very grave and for a moment terrified. He gave James El absolution and commended him for having secretly tried to save the pope "even though only against a quite imaginary plot produced by your own fevered mind at the time."

"For this too I give you absolution," he added.

James El felt childishly secure in Monsignor Salvatore's tiny library where plots and informing seemed entirely unreal.

Being received into the Church felt like being forgiven by pope John Paul 1 for not having protected him better, and also it rounded off James El's return to Rome in a fittingly logical way. His magic rites were abandoned. So too were the prognostications and the hand-worn Tarot pack. He didn't care what the future held because, being under divine protection now, fear played little part in his life, even fear for Laura.

His sudden relinquishment of occult techniques which had definitely helped him overcome dangers in the past meant that he couldn't any longer be forewarned about events. Laura urged him to take care. But he only smiled at her. Finally he persuaded her too to abandon practices regarded by orthodox catholicism as 'pagan'. Being James El he didn't dislike the practices because of what orthodoxy said but because Christ was now his Tarot pack, his magic, his power of prophecy.

He went to church almost every day. People noticed a strange elation in him. He took Laura to the same restaurants as before, and to parties, with deliberate carelessness. No new instructions came from 'Mike'. The monthly instalments at the Banco di Roma ceased.

Meanwhile he and Laura pursued their secret plans for departure. There was the question of money. It would be impossible for her to take her sizable fortune out of Italy due to blocked-currency regulations. They decided to take as much cash as they could handle without arousing suspicion when withdrawing it from the banks, and to slip across the border north of Udine.

Not that he or she had real hopes that he would survive that long. One morning, unable to bear the silence and suspense any longer, he rushed out to make a call on Ralph. The apartment was closed up. Ralph's porter downstairs said he'd gone away suddenly. And the phone had been disconnected.

They timed their getaway attempt for December 13. No unpleasant calls came. No one seemed to be trailing them in the streets ("There's no need", said James El, "we're sitting targets").

The days passed in nerve-wracking boredom.

He kept making sure that Ralph wasn't back in town.

On the evening of December 12 they went to a party, wanting to behave as if nothing was about to happen. When they got back there was a phonecall from Ralph. James El's heart sank into his bowels.

"Think I'd deserted you?" Ralph said.

The two of them met without Laura later that night at the Florida club and to James El's immense relief he found Ralph as distraught and clearly on the run as he himself was. They drank a lot of frascati. Ralph said he'd got himself into a bit of a fix and didn't know how to get out of it.

"I tried a bunk to Malta but it didn't work."
Then: "You've got to get away by latest tomorrow night. And take me with you."

"Take you?"

Ralph outlined his plan. At eight o'clock the following evening James El was to be at the church of Santa Lucia and wait there for him, kneeling in the tiny chapel of the Madonna on the south side of the apse. Ralph had chosen this church because tomorrow would be the saint's name day and the place would not only be open in the evening but ablaze with candles to celebrate the patron saint of light and sight. It would be easy to merge in with the crowd.

As for Laura, she was to wait for a car to pick her up at James El's apartment. It would arrive at about 7.45 pm the following evening. It would take her to the church of Santa Lucia, behind the Campo dei Fiori, and of course she had to be equipped for travelling. Neither of them, however, should arouse suspicion by taking suitcases.

If Ralph hadn't turned up by 8.15 James El and Laura were to go without him. They would be driven to the airport where tickets were already waiting for them. The driver of the car had received instructions. It was a clever plan but James El didn't fall for it, though Ralph acted the part of the hunted and frightened man to perfection.

But he told Ralph, "OK, I'll be there".

He talked it over with Laura most of the night. It was she who finally decided that Ralph must be in earnest, having himself defied the outfit on many occasions in order to save James El's life.

"How do you know this?" James El asked her.

"He told me himself. He saved you for me."
James El understood this at once and she needn't have added, "Ralph being in love with me..."

She told him how for weeks she had carried his true reports to a plastic sack at a dump near Piazza Navona. To her immense relief James El said, "Thank God you did it. Your skin's safe. They won't touch you at least. And perhaps you saved mine too."

A phonecall from Ralph at dawn---to Laura---confirmed her opinion. Ralph told her, "They're out to get him and if he doesn't shift his arse out of Rome tonight they'll get not only him but me!"

She was convinced.

She thought of doing the cards just to make sure. But they fell asleep, exhausted, and by the time they woke up it was time to prepare for the journey.

7) Next evening the crowded church was brilliant

with lighted candles and as James El stepped inside a feeling of extraordinary happiness came over him. As he took the holy water on the tips of his fingers and made the sign of the cross a sentence came into his mind with some clarity: 'And now you will meet the keeper of the southern gate.' Did it mean 'Mike' himself? or something unusually fortunate? He took it as a good omen.

He walked down the side-aisle to the little chapel of the madonna and knelt close to the altar. He found himself genuinely praying, his eyes closed. He stayed like this for at least five minutes. He heard a soft step behind him and guessed it to be Ralph. He felt a pricking sensation in the elbow and was just about to turn to find out what had happened when a great weakness came over him and he fell slowly sideways.

Not until the following day was he found, already dead by several hours.

The priest who found him said he had a look of unbelievable happiness---'almost revelation'---on his face.

It hadn't apparently entered James El's mind that Michael, keeper of the southern gate, was also Lord of Death.

8) Laura waited in James El's apartment at the appointed time. There were two letters from James El for her, both marked 'To be opened later'.

A car was waiting downstairs with Ralph at the wheel.

"We'll have to be quick about this," he said and drove off at once.

After a time she realised they were driving towards the coast.

"What about James El?" she asked him.

"Something went wrong. Hopefully he's meeting us at the airport."

"What went wrong?" She was shivering.

"I'll tell you on the plane."

"Where are we going?"

"London."

He had air tickets ready. Only after take-off did he relax. He turned to her with a smile and said enigmatically, "Well, I wasn't worried for you but I was for me!"

At London airport two security men came forward at the passport desk and asked them to follow them. They went to a room behind the customs area. Ralph was placed under arrest and Laura advised to find a London hotel for a few days as she might be needed for questioning.

As they walked together in front of the security men Ralph told her in a normal voice, not at all shaken, "I knew somebody was trailing me---thank God it was the police!"

During the next few days Laura was interrogated

several times. In the second interview they showed her a photograph of James El and asked her if she knew the man. When she said yes they told her he'd been found dead in a Roman church.

She opened the two letters from James El. One contained the cash he'd drawn from his own account. The other was a copy of his will leaving her the inheritance he'd never been able to touch.

Perhaps he hadn't forgotten after all, as he walked into the church of Santa Lucia, that Michael keeper of the southern gate was also Lord of Death.

Length: 80-100.000 words.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Until I see a full transcript of the report on John Paul 1's death which was put before the judicial authorities in Rome by the Civiltà Cristiana I cannot of course give exact details of the weaknesses in the security arrangements surrounding the pope, or the suspicious nature of certain circumstances relating to his death. I've been promised this transcript or a faithful verbal account when I return to Italy.

Thus the sample chapter above is imaginable rather than probable.

And of course I cannot place my characters (and thus the action) properly until I know what people are rumoured to have been involved in the suspicious setup. Once I know this I will place them from the beginning of the narrative, so that by the time we get to the popes they are well established and can be seen by James El as obvious threats to papal security.

Also the theme of the unknown doctor who examined the pope on the day of his death (it is a fact that one did see him five hours or so before) either has to be ridded of the imputation that an injection was administered (as I've done here in the synopsis) or, if in fact an injection was administered, eliminated altogether from the narrative as a libel hazard.

'ELI' (L'Esercito della Liberazione Italiana) is a fiction, invented to cover the fictional murders of Pietrafino and Marco Petrucci.

The 'infiltrator' into the Vatican, with access to the pope's person, remains a mystery in this synopsis because I haven't decided on the form the infiltration should take. This also will depend on the Civiltà Cristiana report.

But it is James El's obsessive quality, his secret and often dark will that guides the narrative and creates pace and tension and an increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere as he sees John Paul's death (and his own?) drawing near. At no time can we be sure that there is actually an 'outfit' or a 'control' behind his assignments and not simply Ralph

bringing about his destruction. That would be very far-fetched---Ralph filling up James El's account at the Banco di Roma, providing him with a splendid apartment and handing him Laura's address. But we can't be sure. In fact I'm toying with the idea of setting up possibilities for James El's father to be the hidden supplier of the money (through Ralph), or at least feasible arguments that this could be the case. I don't in other words want to reproduce a typical spy-thriller situation---not because it wouldn't work but because the genre is so artificial and in this story we have far too rich a canvas, set partly in the corridors of the Vatican, to waste credibility on children's games. The atmosphere of the book must be so fraught with tension, nervousness and uncertainty, in this city where even the poor aren't safe from kidnappings (since whole streets can be relied on to raise ransom-funds) and where people who should know continue to assert that there is a heavy cocaine-traffic in the highest echelons of the Vatican, so fraught that it may all seem the product of James El's fevered and essentially religious imagination. Hopefully the reader will end the book with the feeling that while he has seen everything in terms of this fevered imagination it all rings remarkably true. And technically this makes it possible for me to avoid libel snares.

Who killed James El? Not Ralph. He was driving Laura to the coast before James El even reached the church. Never having been directly responsible for a killing, Ralph is confident, when taken in at London airport, that he will get a maximum sentence of five years. On the other hand, the book will tell us that he could have been arrested on counts far remote from informing or terrorism, such as bigamy and tax-swindles in Malta... And it may not be so easy for him to deny all knowledge of James El's death, or the possibility that he organised a contract. But if there was a network, and Ralph was part of it, then James El's murder was the price required by them for Ralph's freedom. I haven't decided yet what the arrest means but of course the solution of the riddle of the book will depend on it. Or I may leave it open by having him detained simply on suspicion (as an important witness in the matter of James El's murder) and then released on insufficient evidence. What stands out clear and strong at the end of the book is the strange connection, deeper than any family ties, between Laura, James El and Ralph. They were bound together to the point of their mutual destruction, and we know that from now on life will never be quite worth living for the other two.

Does the story really revolve around Laura? Is she the reason why Ralph helps James El at the beginning and destroys him at the end? Is Ralph as desperately in love with her, as helplessly bound to her, as James El? Was this why he stayed in Rome all those years, though he had a home and

some say a wife and shop in Malta? Was it why he got rid of James El twenty years back by informing on him? And does he now give James El Laura's address in order a) to regain admission into her intimate circle after his fatal affair with her and b) to become an unsuspected onlooker of James El's affair with her?

All these are exciting possibilities which I wish to develop, either as an undeclared subtext ever present to the reader or the declared motivational pattern (which only the reader will see) behind the overt events. The riddle of the book--- apart from the obvious riddles of papal murder etc--- is whether the outfit for which James El believes himself to be informing really exists. And it is round this point that the Laura theme oscillates most enigmatically.