The Rachel Redemption

By : GirlWithEdinburghTattoo

Here is a chapter from my novel The Rachel Redemption which is a fast paced conspiracy theory tale based - perhaps - on some very famous people and events. The chapter I have picked here is very topical as it deals with the ongoing cover-ups in the Catholic Church. If you visit any of the sites selling my book (inc Amazon) you can also read the opening three chapters. Hope you enjoy entering the world of the Rachel Redemption!

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The Rachel Redemption : Chapter 1

Francesco strode purposefully across St Peter's Square, his jet black clerical robes flapping in the early morning breeze. As the dawn broke the Square and the surrounding streets were deserted, the only activity being that of the street cleaners and newspaper delivery men bringing the confirmation - in hard print - of London's tragic event the day before. Francesco slipped in through a concealed entrance at the north-west corner of the Square: his customary route into the Vatican City, at the customary time of day, for his clandestine meetings with Cardinal Moro. It was on a morning like this some months before that Francesco had received his instructions on how he would act in the aftermath of a tragedy - say a car crash in the streets of Rome - involving good friends of his, hypothetical of course. But if such an event did happen, he was to be counted on to offer protection and sanctuary to those who survived and - for whatever reason - could not travel fast or far enough from the scene on their own.

The cardinal's room, situated in the offices - or uffizi - which controlled the day to day running of the Vatican, was located far away from the Pope's residence as well as the famous tourist attractions. However security was just as rigid with every visitor having to show a special pass and move through an airport-type scanner, the modern day necessities at odds with the Baroque-style building which, opulent by anyone's standards, would be considered modest and practical compared to its neighbouring riches. The cardinal's room was small and book-lined, countless heavy tomes - detailing international law - strained the old wooden shelves, a desk-top computer and a lap-top sat incongruously on a paper-strewn antique desk, piles of law journals lay stacked on the floor. The surroundings always reminded Francesco of a university tutorial room or the chaotic office of a campaigning lawyer - Cardinal Moro had, in fact, trained in law before joining the church and it was this former profession which was now his main, and invaluable, contribution to the Catholic Church. His expertise, far from being a dusty relic, was updated daily by access to all modern media. The cardinal himself did look like something from an earlier time - a head that appeared like a skull, with a thin - almost transparent - layer of grey-tinged skin stretched over it. He was completely bald with imperceptible eyelashes and brows which gave his eyes a penetrating quality as they peered through old-fashioned pince-nez spectacles which pinched his aquiline nose. It was hard to tell his age but most accounts put him in his late seventies.

Francesco had done his customary knock on the heavy oak door, even though the cardinal was expecting him and had been informed of his arrival by Security.

'Hello Francesco, it is good to see you, although - as usual - it is sad circumstances that bring you here.'

'Yes, cardinale.'

'Please sit down, I won't keep you long.'

Francesco sat on the only seat that was ever available - a low, wooden-framed armchair with a torn burgundy leather seat which spilled horsehair stuffing. The cardinal sat as usual behind his desk in his papal robes, it was rumoured that he wore jogging bottoms or thermal long-johns beneath the robes and visitors were always tempted to a sneak a look from their low vantage point in order to confirm or refute the theory. Francesco, however, never felt light-hearted enough during these meetings to give that any thought.

Cardinal Moro clasped his hands under his chin and leaned forwards on his elbows.

'Father Francesco, I think we have some serious work ahead of us.' His voice, matching his appearance, was thin and strained but had a determined and authoritative edge to it.

'Yes, of course, cardinale.'

'Now - you have always been invaluable to us, particularly in your work with the Camino Convent and your friendship with Lady Rachel - or should I say the 'late' Lady Rachel.' He peered over his glasses and paused as if to underscore his qualification, but there was no further attempt at irony or any other indication that he was party to contradictory information. 'And of course - by extension - your acquaintance with Mr Briars and the whole 'inner circle' of that family.'

'Cardinale, I know what you are going to say.'

'You do, Francesco?'

'I think so - the carnage that was visited on the city of London yesterday, following on so soon from the crash here in Rome. There is such an air of sadness but I fear that the mood will soon change to one of revenge and hate.'

The cardinal gave a slightly condescending smile. 'And what do you think we can possibly do to help that situation?'

'We must continue to promote peace and understanding, let people know that the best way to honour the memory of Rachel is to forgive.'

'Yes, precisely! The promotion of Lady Rachel's memory is very important and we hope that it will not be that long before we can start on the road of granting a sainthood, but in terms of whom that memory can help, I was thinking of closer to home... '

Francesco continued, unabated, with his train of thought: 'In recent times I have only spoken to Mr Briars very briefly on the phone. But if you want me to meet with him - make an official representation - to let him know that the Holy See cannot support his intentions... '

Cardinal Moro shifted back in his chair and tapped a long bony finger against parched lips. 'I wouldn't think that necessary at this time. Should Mr Briars decide to take direct action against another country - or indeed if he were to support another major world power in any such endeavour - an official condemnation would be issued by the Holy See.'

'But then it may be too late, innocent lives may have already been lost.'

'My dear Francesco, your intentions are admirable but we have to ask ourselves if talking to Mr Briars would have any effect on his actions. Besides, our work is offering spiritual guidance and presenting an image that is unsullied by earthly concerns - that is what we should be concentrating on.'

'So, that is what it comes down to... it is all about image?'

'An image is no small thing, we all become dust in the end, but a spirit, a memory, an ideal - an image, if you like - will last and go on to inspire people down the generations.' The cardinal paused as if to leave a gap of decency before revealing what was at the forefront of his mind. 'As you will know, Francesco, in recent years our beloved church has not attracted the most favourable coverage in the media. This interest has centred on our own poor misguided brothers and sisters, who have strayed from the righteous path and are being vilified, when instead they should be helped and encouraged to find their way again. That is the core of our belief - to forgive.'

Francesco looked at the cardinal with cold eyes, he knew where the conversation was heading. 'You are talking about the accusations of child abuse?' he said flatly.

'I wouldn't use secular terms such as those, but it is the area of concern where we must concentrate our efforts at this time. In particular, there is the case in Ireland - the one that is coming to trial - there will be a lot of media interest. Now, the way I see it - there are a number of measures we can take to deal with this kind of situation: most importantly, we must promote ourselves - show people the immense good we do in the world; but, almost just as important, we also need a universal, meaningful image that will draw people to us. It doesn't mean that we are covering anything up, it just means that we are presenting our true face.'

'And this face, this image - would you have someone like Rachel Briars in mind?'

The cardinal looked down towards the floor. 'Of course, Mrs Briars had the perfect image and there was that strong involvement with our church, which always gave hope that she would one day take the full vows and end her days in our faith.'

Francesco shifted in his chair, he could feel his manner becoming more cold and detached. 'It is a pity that another faith got there first.'

'I don't many people were convinced by that gesture. Mrs Briars was a remarkable woman but it was true that sometimes she let her heart rule her head.'

'She was a devotee of Islam at the point of her death... '

'Yes, and her remains were dealt with accordingly, I know.'

The cardinal fixed Francesco with a stare, and the slightest of knowing smiles danced across his mouth. Francesco averted his gaze, and looked towards the light from a golden sunrise streaming in through the thick lead-latticed window, as he spoke.

'So we are to let the destruction of innocents happen while we fight over Rachel's memory?'

'My dear Francesco, all things happen for a reason, it is God's way. We mortals cannot think that we can control everything, we can plan - but plans go awry. And we - as a Church - cannot get involved in every world issue, particularly when it involves another major religion, far better to let things take their course, and we will find that letting things play out on the world stage takes attention away from us while we get our own house in order.'

Francesco continued to look towards the window and spoke in a resigned manner. 'So what is it you want me to do, cardinale?'

'I want you to carry on as you have done already - taking care of the memory of the departed.'

Francesco looked hard at the older man, he was starting to weary of the endless mental chess games that they would play out whenever they met. How much did he know of the crash, before and after?

'Yes, cardinale,' he said finally.

'Good, good. I have been reading the chatter, and as can be expected, there have been many sightings of Lady Rachel since the car crash, much like the sightings of angels during times of war. But maybe it is not good, sometimes, to let angels wander about on their own.' The cardinal allowed himself a full smile, showing worn

yellowing teeth. 'In fact I was just reading before you came in about an 'angel of the London Underground ' who was present at the tragic event yesterday. Some are even saying it was the Lady Rachel, returned to protect those not ready to pass through the veil. It is a potent image, you must admit.'

Francesco smarted - partly at the cardinal's knowing delivery, and partly at his own failure to pick up on the story before their meeting. The cardinal, quite satisfied that he had had the upper hand during the conversation, sought to bring their meeting to a close.

'So, Francesco, if you just continue to do your good work I will contact you when it is necessary again.'

The cardinal made a vague visual blessing with his bony fingers, turned his attention to the computer screen and sat in silence. Francesco shuffled his feet, waiting for the usual verbal blessing that signalled permission to leave.

'You know,' started the cardinal after a while, 'it is always good to have something tangible. Some kind of proof of someone's existence or more importantly: proof of their non-existence - in an earthly sense. Relics are hugely important, they bring so many people to us. Do you know the figures for people going to see the embalmed heart of Sister Veronica in the Santa Augusta cloister? And that is not even in the centre of Rome, it is quite astounding. Can you imagine how many people would want to see a relic from say - the Lady Rachel, just for an example?'

Francesco was starting to think that the old man was going mad so thought it permissible to give his response a sarcastic edge.

'As I have said before, cardinale, there was nothing left from that terrible crash. Had there been, I would have brought you the very heart of the Lady Rachel on a silver platter.'

The cardinal chuckled. 'Ha, ha, you probably think of me as a relic from a bygone age, all this talk of body parts may seem quite macabre to you younger people. I shouldn't be saying this, but the authenticity of such items has always been dubious and these days they are subject to far more scrutiny. My goodness, these days we have the scientific community checking and double-checking everything as never before, with DNA profiling and forensic testing and the like.'

Francesco was now quite convinced that the cardinal was unhinged and was determined to bring the meeting to a close. 'Cardinale, if there is nothing more... '

The older man fixed him with a strange look. 'The Lady Alscott - I believe you gave her the last rites, is that not so? And she is entombed at her home on one of the Scottish islands, is that not the case?'

Discarding his usual deference, Francesco met his gaze and upped his level of sarcasm. 'If I had known of your wishes - and if it had been allowed - I would have brought you a souvenir of my time with Lady Alscot. Was there a particular body part that you would have preferred?'

'You are making fun of me, but things which may seem outlandish and tasteless at the time can bring comfort and aid to a great many people down the ages. Now, Francesco, if that is something you cannot subscribe to, and you are not entirely happy with your position in our Church... and maybe not even with our religion in general... and of course if you were to find greater fulfilment living a secular life - that could be arranged, but there is the matter of the many privileges and benefits that you have at the moment. I know that your family appeared rich, but at the time of your father's death he owed a considerable amount of money, did he not?'

The younger man broke his gaze and didn't answer.

'Taking on the debts and the sins of one's family is second nature to people like us and we look upon our Church as our family, of course we do. All I ask is that a little bit is given back, it is the least we can ask for.'

'You want me to take something from the dead, in order to help the Church?'

'The dead or the living, as long as it's authentic.'

Francesco sat - stunned - as the cardinal spoke his blessing and turned from him, before adding:

'I'm sure I can count on you to do what is necessary.'

Francesco mumbled a farewell and swept out of the uffizi and into St Peter's square. The towering marble apostles loomed over him as the cardinal's words and his own thoughts swirled around in his head. He felt like the trusted huntsman in an old fable, sent out into the woods to cut out the heart of the princess and bring it back to prove her death. Is that really what the cardinal wanted? He had spent so long breathing in the incense-filled air of the Church and listening to its representatives, even speaking their language, he no longer knew what was reality or what they expected of him. What did the old man and those he represented know - or care - about Rebecca and the other occupants of the car on that night? They were merely interested in an image and how it could benefit them.

Francesco stopped at a news-stand and bought a copy of La Repubblica, he scanned the front page which gave its main account of the bombing, and then turned to page six which had a collection of the more human-interest stories as told by eye-witnesses. A shiver ran down his spine when he read the story of the 'Angel of the Underground', with its description of a mystery woman who had helped some of the survivors - more than one person described her as being physically similar to Lady Rachel but with darker colouring. Francesco drew some comfort that the story did not have front page coverage and also that it fitted in with the popular theory of a mass hallucination - whatever it could be put down to, the story seemed to be rooted in the other-worldly and here-say - not actual fact. But he could feel in the pit of his stomach that the woman they talked of was Rebecca, and he was worried that she hadn't made her way to York - he would need to help her, that was for sure. Neatly folding the newspaper he tucked it under his arm and looked up at the apostles, now set against a clear blue sky.

'What should I do now?' he asked them, but they didn't reply.

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