

# *Virgin and Child*

a novel



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*In memory of Anne*

*What help is it to me that Mary is full of grace, if I am not also full of grace? And what help is it to me that the Father gives birth to his Son unless I too give birth to him?*

*Meister Eckhart,*  
1260-1328, translated by Matthew Fox

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# Chapter One

4 April. Two days after the Feast of the Annunciation, the Wednesday general audience in St Peter's Square. The sky a piercing blue, and the colonnades sharp and white in the clear sunlight. The square in front of the great basilica thronged with people; tens of thousands of them, all gathered to see him, Pope Patrick, newly elected the first Irish pope.

The popemobile lurched forward and sped down the bright avenues of cobbles between the crowds of people, penned in behind the security barriers. Flags waved all around him and hands stretched out, mobile phones flashed and clicked. The people shouted his name joyfully, *Papa Patrizio! Papa Patrizio!* He heard it in English, in Spanish, *Papa Patricio*, in French, *Pape Patrice*, in Polish, *Papież Patryk!*

All around him walked the security men in black suits, with impassive faces and guarded looks, muttering into concealed microphones.

He should be safe. Everyone who entered the square passed through the airport-style gates to be scanned and searched. Security cameras pointed at him from every corner, men patrolled on top of the colonnades with machine-guns, police in their blue uniforms and pill-box hats and Swiss Guards in their brilliant striped costumes stood everywhere. It was still so new to him. He must learn to let them slip into the background – it was the people, his flock, who should be the focus of his attention.

The popemobile swerved round a corner and abruptly stopped – he had to grab the handrail to steady himself. A crowd of Irish pilgrims to his left waved their flags, shouting his name. He leaned forward and took their hands, one by one, blessed them all, and an elderly

woman, tears in her eyes, handed him a miniature bottle of Irish whiskey. He smiled and kissed it, slipped it into his pocket.

Stopping again near the fountains, he saw a young man in a wheelchair, pale-faced, his head lolling to one side, pressed up against the barrier. He gave a blessing and the man wriggled excitedly in response, flapping his arms. The woman holding the wheelchair wept and he leaned over and pressed her hand, murmuring a prayer. Then he sped back towards the gleaming façade of St Peter's. More cheers greeted him, more flags and banners waving. The vehicle came to a stop below the steps that led up to the dais. To the right of the great doors, the cardinals stood in their black cassocks, their fuchsia-pink sashes flapping in a sudden gust of wind. The wooden cross and the white throne stood waiting under the canopy. He was already familiar with what would follow: the reading of the gospel in several languages, followed by his catechesis, the translations, the sung Paternoster and the blessing.

He took a deep breath and turned to look back over the square, saw the water stream off the fountains like a spray of liquid silver in the sunlight, two seagulls circle overhead and, in the distance, a plane pass between the colonnades. The crowd murmured expectantly and he heard the crackling of the walkie-talkies, an announcement booming out over the speakers in several languages. The air felt crisp and clear and the wind blew towards him from across the river – it carried faint sounds of angry voices chanting in the distance. They came from the direction of the Castel Sant'Angelo. Could the demonstrators be there already? He had been told there was no danger of them approaching the square.

He stepped down on to the stone paving and turned to walk up the steps to the dais. Someone called to him, and he saw a little baby in a pink flowered suit held high up in the air above the crowd. Long arms passed her forward; she cried loudly, frantically waving her hands. Supposing they dropped her? He turned to the waist-high



barriers which separated him from the people and held out his hands. A woman at the front leaned over and offered the baby to him.

The little girl had a shock of black hair, her face was red and angry, and her arms jerked with strange, random movements – was there something wrong with her? He held her awkwardly; there was no shawl, nothing to wrap her in. She was surprisingly heavy and strong as she wriggled and yelled in his arms. He tried to cradle her as he had seen mothers do, but the baby did not like it. Who was the mother? He wanted to hand her back before something awful happened, but he saw only a sea of staring faces. Well, he must bless her – but he had no free hands. The mother must have wanted this so much for her daughter, to bring her here and hand her over to strangers like this, so that one day she could say to her that she been blessed by the pope.

Well, he could not make the sign of the cross in blessing, but at least, he could kiss her.

His head bent down and his lips pressed against the hot forehead. The baby stopped crying for a moment, as if astonished at being touched; her brown eyes stared up at him; her clothes felt slightly damp, a strange sweet smell reached his nostrils. She jerked her little body backwards, screamed again loudly, squirmed so vigorously in his arms that he was afraid that he would drop her on to the hard stones. He looked around to summon one of the bodyguards.

The guard stepped forward, took the baby, and turned to the pilgrims. He heard them asking, where was the mother? No one seemed to know. People started to shout and turn to find her; the guard walked along the side of the barricade, holding up the baby, appealing to the people for help. The baby's cries were frantic now; a murmur of disquiet went through the crowd.

The guards turned away from Patrick, leaving him alone, standing close to the barricade. Someone pressed his hand, grabbed the hem of his sleeve. People murmured prayers, petitioned him, someone thrust a rosary into his hand, asked him to offer words of comfort.

Mobile phones and cameras flashed in front of him, inches from his face; the corner of a flag trailed across his forehead. What should he do? It was getting out of control. Then a cry went up; it sounded like the mother had been found. A sharp movement in the crowd made him turn back towards them.

A woman was leaning over the barrier, a foot or so from him, wearing a bright red shawl. Unlike the other pilgrims, she was not looking at him – she was glancing around nervously. She turned to face him and he saw that she was not smiling; her mouth was set in a red, hard line. The shawl dropped to reveal bare shoulders and a low-cut vest, and the sight of so much bare flesh was shocking. Her skin was very pale, as pale as her face – she had long, chestnut-coloured hair and freckles. Why did her face make him feel so uneasy? Was there something wrong with her – was she mentally ill?

He saw the red scarf flashing through the air and suddenly she was over the barrier and hurling herself at him. Her white face was close to his, her mouth was drawn into a snarl; he saw her hand held up in the air. He ducked and felt the impact as she struck his cheek, slapped it hard with a strength that almost knocked him sideways. There was no pain; only shock – what was happening? He staggered; his glasses fell from his face and he grabbed at them. Her voice shrieked close to his ear:

‘Murderer! Murderer!’

She grabbed his arm. Her fingers pinched his flesh and he cried out as her nails dug into his skin. He tried to move but all the strength seemed to have vanished from him.

‘Murderer!’ she yelled again in a high voice.

Her teeth were bared like a monster, like a fiend from hell – her spit sprayed out and struck his face. He tugged backwards, but she lurched after him, her mouth still open – it was as if she wanted to bite him. He had to stop her. He raised his own right hand and slapped her, hard, on the cheek.

The sound rang out. A silence had fallen over the crowd. He was aware of them all stunned and staring at him.

Where were the guards? Why had no one come to help him? He watched, detached, as the woman's hand released his arm and flew instinctively to her face; a small red bead of blood appeared at her nostril and started to run down to her lip.

She wiped the blood away with the back of her hand and examined it, her face blank with disbelief. Then she screamed again and threw herself forwards. This time a flash of black came from the left and a security guard grabbed her roughly, then there was a second man pushing him aside and together they twisted her round and pulled her to the ground in front of him. One of them took hold of her arms and jerked them violently behind her back. Everything was happening, now, in slow motion; Patrick watched them pin her down and grind her head on to the stone pavement. Her white face twisted to one side, smeared with blood.

'Don't hurt her!' he ordered them, but they had seized him too and were pushing him away from her. He stumbled, tripping over her red shawl, and he snatched hold of it as they pushed him backwards. He could still hear her shouting over and over, that same word, 'Murderer!'

Strong arms pulled him up on to the popemobile, then they pushed him to the floor and his bodyguards crowded all around him, cutting off the sight of the crowds. The vehicle whirred over the cobbles, the crowd were shouting above the sound of the electric engine, he could hear screams and cries of fear. He wanted to pause, to go back and reassure them, but the men would not let him. They reached the side of the square and he was hustled out of the sunlight and into a vast room, the hallway to the papal apartments. Here they finally let go of him and he could breathe.

He stood on a great expanse of marble floor, under high walls and columns and a great arched ceiling. His own pale reflection was shadowed in the patterned marble, so smooth it looked like water.

After the roar of people in the square the silence was oppressive; every sound was magnified, every whisper sounded like a giant hiss, every footfall rang out like a shot. There was no comfort in this room with its jagged gold surfaces, hard angles, wood and plaster and stone. They led him towards a red plush velvet seat under the window.

He should not have hit her.

Everything had been filmed. His action would be on camera. Of course, she had attacked him first. It was self-defence. But it is not what Christ would have had him do. The words of Matthew 5:39 admonished him: 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'

He sat still, surrounded by security men, all talking at once as they listened to the voices in their earpieces. He touched his red-hot cheek. His hand was shaking. Where were his glasses? He must have lost them in the square. Was he injured? No, it was the shock of it.

It was his right cheek that she had struck. She must have been left-handed.

And that word, 'Murderer.' What could she mean? Could she have got in from the demonstration? It was those doctors, those women who aborted their children, who were murderers. What had *he* done?

The shawl in his hand, how red it was, a deep maroon, like dried blood.

Footsteps hurried towards him – a familiar figure in black, with a shock of white-blond hair and heavy glasses. Thank goodness, it was Father Alfonso, the second of his private secretaries. The priest bowed briefly and bent down to speak rapidly into his ear in his awkward, accented English. The audience, he said, had been abandoned. They would immediately review security arrangements. The woman had been arrested. Alfonso would come with him immediately to his private chambers – the police would like to speak to him. A doctor could come and see him if he wished.

Alfonso's face bore no expression – his glasses were so thick they shielded and distorted the dark eyes. All the same, his voice seemed softened with concern.

Patrick looked down at his arm. The woman's nails had torn his skin, there were long raised weals and a faint smear of blood, but he was sure he did not need to see a doctor.

'You should put something on those cuts, at least, Holy Father,' said Alfonso.

'No, I'm fine,' he said. 'I can't disappoint all these people. I must go back and continue with the audience.'

'It's too late,' said Alfonso. 'The square is being emptied and shut off. Everyone can be given tickets for another audience.'

'But the pilgrims. They have come from far – it will not be easy for all of them to come again.'

'Holy Father, I'm sorry, too.'

'Yes, of course; it can't be helped.'

'The Head of the Gendarmerie will come and talk to you.'

'Tell him to come to my office.'

They escorted him upstairs. At last he was alone, in the security of his rooms. How quickly he had become used to the papal apartments with their high painted ceilings, marble floors and the heavy, dark furniture. He realised that he was shaking – his feebleness disturbed him. The image of the small, screaming baby kept coming back to him, the awkward feel and unpleasant smell of her.

From inside his pocket he pulled out the miniature bottle of whiskey. The pale gold liquid was inviting; perhaps a drink would help. He unscrewed the top, took a gulp, and placed the bottle down on the polished surface of his desk with a satisfying little tap. What would he say to the policeman? It was he who felt guilty. He had hit a woman. But surely you were allowed to retaliate when hit? How much force were you allowed to use? Did he use too much? He saw again the drop of blood issuing from the woman's nostril.

Alfonso returned a few moments later with the Cardinal Secretary of State, Romano. On entering, Romano gave him a formal, deep bow.

A purple sash was pinched tightly around Romano's angular, narrow form. The thin face was lined with two thick ridges which ran from his nose to the sides of his mouth, and deep frown lines on his forehead gave him a look of perpetual disapproval. Romano's English was surprisingly poor, and he spoke with such a thick accent that it was sometimes difficult to understand him.

Patrick had been persuaded that keeping Romano in post was a good thing; he was a Vatican insider, he knew all the ropes – a traditionalist, deeply concerned about the integrity of the Church's moral teaching, especially on matters of sexuality and the family. Here, they were in agreement. But as the weeks had gone by, there were signs that Romano did not approve of him – that the cardinal sensed some weaknesses in him – that he thought he would have done better than he did. After all, Romano had narrowly missed becoming pope himself.

Yes, it had been a mistake to ask Romano to stay. How easy it would have been to simply let his appointment lapse with the departure of the previous pope. Now, it was much more difficult to think of a reason for him to go.

Romano bowed again. '*Sua Santità*, Your Holiness, we must immediately review the security arrangements. We have cancelled the audiences for the next weeks, and the Sunday outdoor Mass.'

'That is too much. I would prefer that they carry on as usual.'

'I have spoken to the Inspector General of the Vatican Gendarmerie, Pietro Giordano. He is in agreement.'

'I wish to speak to him now, Your Eminence.'

'*Santità*, he is coming.'

The door opened and Alfonso ushered the inspector in. Giordano was a small man, not in uniform but wearing a smart Italian suit. He

bowed obsequiously several times, as if uncertain how to behave in the presence of the pope. Patrick indicated for him to sit in the chair opposite.

Giordano cleared his throat. 'Your Holiness, do you wish that we speak in English? I can speak well enough, I think.'

'Please.'

'The woman is being questioned but is refusing to say anything, Your Holiness. I think that we should also call in the Italian police. We are afraid she may be connected with the demonstration. This may not have been simply an opportunist attack – it may have been a deliberate, planned attempt to harm you.'

Patrick had been warned earlier about the demonstration. Twenty years ago, there had been a scandal when the bodies of aborted babies were thrown into the Tiber by hospitals that carried out this vile procedure. A few weeks ago, there had been a demonstration to remember these lost lives. Now, there was a counter-demonstration of women protesting their right to have easier abortions.

'There were ten thousand of them today,' the inspector said. 'Some of them are known to us. They are politically motivated, allied to far-left groups.'

Ten thousand. A large number, perhaps, but far fewer than those who had gathered in St Peter's Square. Patrick shook his head.

'I do not want to bring any charges. I am unhurt. I hope the woman has not been at all injured herself – the security men seemed a little rough with her. Must we bring in the Italian police? This is on Vatican territory.' Technically he had full judiciary authority and could pardon someone at any time, but he also knew that under the Lateran Treaty he did have to co-operate with the Italian police.

'We must do something, Your Holiness, or there will be an outrage. It will be on the global news broadcasts already. We cannot allow someone who has done something like this to simply walk free. It would set a terrible precedent.'

‘Perhaps she is mentally ill, unstable. She certainly looked strange to me.’

Giordano nodded. ‘If she is ill, then she must be admitted to hospital for an assessment. Well, we will see. We are investigating her background, to see if she has any terrorist links. She has an Irish passport.’

‘So, Inspector, do I.’

Giordano coughed awkwardly and put his hand in front of his mouth. After a pause, Patrick asked, ‘And the baby – did they find the mother? It didn’t belong to the woman who attacked me, did it? Was the baby all right?’

The inspector looked confused for a moment; then he seemed to recall. ‘Ah, yes. We questioned the mother at the scene. We thought it might have been a deliberate tactic, to distract the security guards, but it seems the two events were not connected.’

Giordano asked some detailed questions about what had happened; Patrick answered as well as he could. When he said that in the scuffle he had slapped the woman to try to get her to release his arm, the inspector looked up sharply and frowned. Romano’s head swivelled and stared at him out of the corner of one eye, like a bird of prey.

Patrick held out his arm, pushing up his sleeve. The scratches looked angry, redder than they had done before. The inspector nodded, made a note.

‘We should have photographs taken,’ he said. ‘This will help if there is a prosecution, or if she makes an accusation against you.’

An accusation? Against him? Might it come to that? This was incredible. It was he who had been attacked, he had a right to defend himself. But again, he felt an acute sense of discomfort, that he had acted wrongly. ‘There were many witnesses,’ Patrick said. ‘They will have seen what happened.’

‘Indeed, we are taking witness statements right now, Your Holiness.’



Romano turned to the inspector and said something rapidly in Italian. The inspector nodded. Patrick did not want to admit that he couldn't follow them; what a nuisance that today his private secretary, Thomas, who always translated for him, had gone to visit his sister.

'Is there anything else, Your Holiness?' The inspector was still watching him. Patrick had a pain behind his eyes, the beginnings of a headache; he wished that they would go away.

'I don't think so.' Then he remembered the red scarf. Where had he put it? He found it on the chair by his desk and handed it to the Inspector.

Why, when it left his hands, did he have a momentary feeling of regret?

The inspector retreated, shuffling backwards, still bowing. Father Alfonso showed him out and came back to the desk. 'Is there anything I can bring you, Holy Father?'

'Thank you, no.' If only they could leave him alone, just for a few minutes.

'How are you feeling, Holy Father? Shall I cancel your other appointments?'

'No. I will carry on as usual. Give me just an hour.' He picked up the little whiskey bottle and drained the liquid that remained. He could not help smiling at the look of strict disapproval on Alfonso's face.

'One of the pilgrims gave it to me,' Patrick said, though why he felt he had to excuse himself he didn't know. 'I thought I could use it.'

'Holy Father, that is not safe!' Alfonso said. 'It has not been screened. Something could have been in it.'

Patrick found himself smiling again. 'Father Alfonso, it is quite all right, there is no danger. It was given to me by an Irishwoman, not by a cardinal.'