

IGNAZIO PANDOLFO

THE LORD OF LIES

THRILLER

Translated by Anwen Roys



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PROLOGUE

In Lincoln Park the wind blows over from the lake and rustles the maple leaves, tinted red by the autumn.

‘Little girl, why are you crying?’

The voice that resounds in the quiet stillness of the afternoon is serene and trustworthy.

From the bench the girl lifts her gaze, her face swollen with tears.

He is tall, and cuts a slender figure. His blue eyes are gentle, gleaming with a reassuring light. He smiles.

‘Why aren’t you at school?’ he asks.

‘Who are you? What do you want from me?’

‘My name is Frank... Father Frank. I am a priest, I would like to comfort you. Why were you crying?’

‘Because of my step-father, he hates me. I don’t know what to do, all he does is torment me.’

‘Hate you? I don’t believe that.’

‘But can you help me?’

‘Only Jesus can help you, and it’s he that you need to pray to. He will open your heart and give you strength.’

‘But I don’t know how to pray...’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Amy.’

‘You don’t need to be afraid, Amy. I’ll teach you’ he says, handing her a thin rosary. ‘For now, take this, it’s been blessed. It will protect you.’

The girl takes the rosary, examining it curiously.

‘Tomorrow, if you want, you’ll find me in the Holy Name Cathedral. Do you know where it is?’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘We can pray together and we’ll talk. Will you come?’

She sniffs, drying her tears.

‘Good, now, calm down. Go to school, and may God bless you. See you tomorrow.’

The priest walks away. His silhouette stands out in the glare of the afternoon. She follows him with her eyes, holding the rosary tightly in her hands.

CHAPTER ONE

A light mist hung in the air. Visibility was limited, but Martin Radek knew the place well and he drove fast, following the white line in the middle of the road. He was relaxed and happy and quietly whistled the melody to an old song that he could only remember a few verses of.

Either the side of the road, there was only imposing darkness. The headlights of the pick-up sped past the tangle of black oak, sycamore, fern and fir so fast that the trees seemed to be on fire, only to suddenly become reabsorbed into the night.

Suddenly, a contorted sign with rust-eaten writing appeared from the fog. He slowed down and turned left.

‘Finally here...’ he said under his breath. He started singing again, drumming his fingertips on the edge of the steering wheel.

The street was a dirt track and went uphill, getting narrower and narrower all the time. The pick-up had started to jolt. He was forced to slow down.

When the crumbling wall and then the rusty gate that he knew so well appeared, he parked in a grassy space on the right and turned off the engine.

Fumbling around in the dark, he opened the glovebox and

looked for a torch. He turned it on. He rummaged around a bit more and found the keys.

Outside it was freezing cold. He slipped on his black woolen balaclava that he kept in his pocket, filled his lungs with the humid, aromatic air of the forest and started moving, leaving behind his condensed breath. The gate had been closed with a lock and chain. He opened it and moved quickly towards the house, which was surrounded by wild hedgerows and the ruins of old statues.

At the end of the street, he found himself in front of the silhouette of the old stone and wood construction, an enormous threatening creature in the darkness. It seemed as if it were waiting just for him.

He stopped for an instant. He swept the cone of light across the imposing façade of the century-old coat of ivy. Then, with a stone fountain to his right, full of putrid leaves left there to rot for years, he crossed quickly over what once would have been grass and now was a piece of earth covered in weeds.

The enormous wooden oak door had been reinforced recently, and the locks had been changed. He had to concentrate for a minute, to find the right key, and with some difficulty he managed to open the door.

In the hall, which was as vast as a place-of-arms, there was a suffocating smell of mould that made him gasp.

Dazzled by the beam of light, the ghostly outlines of the old furniture, covered in cobwebs and dust, came into view. From the walls hung shreds of what was left of the wallpaper. The ceiling was painted with mythological scenes featuring nymphs and satyrs that, in the glow of the light, seemed to animate themselves in a fictional world, as if they were the custodians of this enormous nothing.

Unimpressed, he reached what had once been the kitchen. From there he went into a cubby hole where he lifted a dusty trapdoor which opened onto a broken wooden staircase, which seemed to sink into the bowels of the earth.

He climbed down them carefully, squeezed between those rough walls, until he found himself in front of an armoured door.

To open it he had to use two different keys. Then he put the balaclava over his head, leaving only his eyes free. He put the torch back in his pocket and flicked the switch.

The yellowish glow from the square lamps attached to the walls with lengths of old wire let a syrupy light into the room, just about allowing him to see.

The air was thick with the smell of blood and excrement.

The girl was there in the centre, naked and with her wrists tied to a chain attached to the ceiling, her feet touching the floor. She must have fainted, because her knees were bent and her arms were fixed in a terrible, unnatural position.

He felt a flash of excitement come over him and felt himself get hard.

God, I'd fuck her if I could, he thought, moving forward to get a closer look.

Her body was covered in a dark, thin layer that emitted a sugary, nauseating stench. It was clotted blood.

'They've lashed her! They've used the small crop... so as not to kill her' he murmured, increasingly excited. For a second he thought about masturbating.

The girl was unconscious, her breath was barely perceptible and was punctuated by pauses.

He lifted the edge of his balaclava over his mouth, put a

cigarette between his lips, lit it and took a couple of drags before skimming it, still lit, across the girl's stomach.

She didn't react. He took another drag before trying again, pressing harder this time.

The girl let out a gasp and woke up.

'Hello princess. Did you sleep well?' he sneered.

She looked at him with bright eyes, her pupils dilated with terror.

'Don't be scared, beautiful girl, I'm here to look after you. Let's have a look'. He said, poking his finger into her mouth.

'Gosh, you're dehydrated, you won't make it until tomorrow at this rate! Wait...'

On the wooden countertop, along with a chaotic mess of different utensils, were medical tools: latex gloves, syringes, a few vials of medicine and a plastic container with a flip-top lid. He grabbed it and moved it towards her lips, and she sucked the water like a thirsty animal.

'That's enough, princess, you've drunk too much, we wouldn't want that pretty little belly to swell up now' he sniggered, throwing the cup onto the floor. 'Now, let me have a look' he added, placing two fingers on her neck.

'I think you've got low blood pressure and a fever. Let's see what we can do to get you better'.

He went back to the countertop and proceeded to fiddle with a phial and a syringe.

'Cortisone and antibiotics, you'll feel better with this' he exclaimed, whilst injecting the entire contents into her thigh.

'There we go! You'll see, tomorrow you'll be in perfect shape'. He giggled, lit another cigarette and with a voice that had turned anxious with anticipation, he carried on: 'Now we've taken care of business, I think it's time for some pleas-

ure. I swear to you, my pretty little slut, that I'd love to fuck you, but I'm afraid I'm not allowed.'

He was silent for a while, then suddenly stubbed out the cigarette on her arm.

The girl yelped and started to cry. Her inarticulate scream sounded like an animal going to slaughter. Then she peed herself.

He, spinning in circles, wooden as a puppet, moved towards the countertop. 'I've just had a great idea' he exclaimed, frantically rummaging through the equipment. Finally, from the heap of junk he pulled out a rusty piece of barbed wire, about a metre long. He looked at it carefully before tying it tightly around the girl's feet.

Increasingly aroused by the girl's heart-breaking cries, he sat in front of her, so as to better enjoy the show, and started masturbating.

He came on the floor, the girl had stopped crying and was slumped over unconscious, knees bent and feet covered in blood.

He pulled up his trousers, lit another cigarette and moved towards her, checking her pulse with two fingers.

'Everything's fine', he murmured, satisfied. 'Jesus, that was amazing!'

He turned the light off, shining the torch one last time on the girl. Then, he closed the screen door behind him, and headed for the exit.

As soon as he got outside, he took his balaclava off and breathed in the clean night air. He went back to the pick-up, made a U-turn and got on the road home.

He turned on the radio at the very moment that one of his favourite songs, *Stayin' Alive* came on. He started to sing, mixing his own falsetto with that of the Bee Gees.

CHAPTER TWO

The car radio was playing an old Pink Floyd song.

‘What a great tune!’ was the last thing the boy said, before the car spiralled out of control and off the road.

It was night time, and they were coming home from a stupid stag do. His brother Jimmy had just turned 19 and was sitting in the seat next to him.

He, completely drunk, had insisted on driving at whatever cost.

Then, the shock, the waking up in the hospital.

Jimmy had been badly hurt. He’d spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. He, miraculously, had scraped by without more than a scratch, aside from the terrible sense of guilt for having put himself at the wheel. No, that would never leave him.

The melancholy twilight of Sunday evening was beginning to fill the room.

Detective William Torres sighed and turned on the lamp, looking around and, trying to rid himself of those sad old memories, which were already ten years old, he proceeded to organise the paperwork that took up his desk.

For a few hours, he'd been flipping between client lists, invoices, payment notices and credit card receipts, making sure everything corresponded to what he saw on his computer screen.

That was what he needed to do to finish the week. He could have done it at any other time, but he had decided to do it every Sunday, in order to keep himself busy and to avoid going to from bar to bar, betting shops or some underground casino.

It was because of his problems with alcohol and gambling that his colleagues had 'encouraged' him to leave the police.

That day, his life had changed. Almost five years had passed and since then he hadn't touched a drop of alcohol and he had stopped all the card games and loan sharks.

The beginning of his new career as a private investigator had been difficult, but with hard work and thanks to experience and friends within the area, he could say that he'd made it. His income now allowed him a certain tranquillity, enough at least to pay the bills sent to him by Professor George Tenison, his psychoanalyst.

The job also left him enough time to look after his brother.

Of course, when he was on Homicide, he was doing something entirely different. Now he had to make do with security, searching for missing people, stalking and above all, affairs.

'Yeah... affairs' he said to himself, a bitter smile crossing his face. His train of thought turned to the day his wife, Carol, had left him. The first months had been hard: he'd tried to go out with a few women he knew, but it never worked out. To resolve the problem of sex he'd even been to prostitutes, which had had nothing but depressing results. Since then, he'd not touched a woman and, deep down, he knew he couldn't resist much longer.

Sometimes he was worried about being depressed, but Tennyson was quick to reassure him: 'You're not depressed, all of your problems come from what happened to your brother' he would repeat.

William's internal monologue was interrupted by the realisation of the terrible silence that filled the deserted building.

He'd always hated silence, and to ease the oppression, he got up, leaving the ball of light shining onto the desk, and went to the window.

For an instant, he saw his own reflection in the glass. He was a tall man, and he still had an athletic physique, although he was carrying a bit of extra weight with his almost fifty years. His eyes were light, but his black hair and dark skin gave away his Hispanic heritage.

He had just a few moments to perceive the fleeting sense of discovering he felt older than he remembered. Then, the image disappeared and the metropolis came into the evening light. From the twentieth floor, Chicago, with its immense sea of orange light, extended in every direction, towards a horizon hidden by a haze.

It was late November and it was cold. A light sprinkling of snow swirled around the air, floating slowly towards the street, where it would turn to mud.

He stayed there for a few minutes, observing what usually increased the sense of defeat in his soul.

Deep down, I've always been a loser, since I became a gambling addict, he thought, before he sat back down.

He was about to go back to sorting his documents, when

the buzz of his mobile phone brought him back to reality. On the display was a number he did not recognise.

For a minute he was tempted not to respond. But to get away from the dark mood that was eating him up, he answered.

‘Hello, is this detective Torres?’

It was the voice of a woman who was sure of herself, even if she did seem full of a certain tension.

‘Yes, ma’am that’s me.’

‘You don’t know me, but I’m Sara Turner. I need to talk to you urgently.’

‘No problem! We can meet tomorrow in my office.’

‘Listen, detective, I need to see you now, I need your help.’

‘Ma’am, it’s very late.’

‘I’m sorry, maybe I’m not being clear enough, this is really urgent. If it’s a question of money...’

‘No, it’s not about money. Fine, where can we meet?’

‘I’ll be having dinner at Club Bub, 901 Weed Street.’

‘I know the place... shall we meet there in an hour?’

‘Ok, thank you, detective.’

Will looked at his watch. It was already eight. He thought for a moment, then dialled Norman Rydel, his secretary.

He was sure he’d find him at home. Norman was a monogamous gay man who spent his evenings watching TV with his partner, Tom.

He’d hired him with a certain scepticism, but he’d turned out to be very useful. In particular, he was great at using the internet. Normal was a real hacker, and could get through

any kind of password or block. He could get into any protected site and download databases, even institutional ones, easily. This had allowed him to solve many cases.

The phone rang for a few seconds, and Tom responded.

‘Hi Tom, can I speak to Norman?’

‘Ok, just a second.’

Whilst he waited, he was surprised to hear the sound of the TV that filled the background with screams and the sound of shooting. *It must be a Western*, he thought.

‘Hi Will, everything ok?’

‘Sorry to disturb you, Norman, but I need your help.’

‘Ok, what’s up?’

‘In an hour I’ve got an appointment with a certain Sara Turner, and I want to turn up prepared. I’d like you do a quick search on her.’

‘Ok, wait a second, I’ve got the computer right here. Sara Turner, did you say?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Does she live here in the city?’

‘I think so’

‘Age?’

‘No idea, maybe 35 or 40...’

‘Not much to go on... Wait, let me have a look. It’s not a very common name. Let’s see... no, no it doesn’t seem like there’s anything noteworthy... hang on, maybe this could be interesting, listen: Sara Turner, 44, born in Rochester. Oh goodness, this is a big one! She’s married to Mike Castle!’

‘You mean the democrat Senator?’

‘Yep, that’s the one. What do you think, could it be her?’

‘I don’t know, maybe. Is there anything else?’

‘No, nothing special. But there’s a photo of her here with her husband. Oh my god, she’s a very beautiful woman! I’ll

send it to you right now on your mobile, so when you meet her, if it is her, you'll be able to recognise her.'

'Great, Norman. I'll see you tomorrow in the office. Thank you.'

The picture must have been a couple of years old. It had been taken at a political event, probably a convention or something similar.

Sara Turner was a brunette with a sexy look, sheathed in an electric blue pantsuit, definitely designer. Her husband was chubby and blonde, and wore thick glasses. He wore a beige suit and a dark polka dotted tie.

She, a little taller than him, towered next to him with a typical first lady attitude. He, a professional politician, smiled at the camera, clearly trying to transmit an air of calm and authority.

Will turned his phone off, satisfied. He put it in his pocket and went outside.

The taxi pulled up in front of the bar, on the other side of the street. Club Bub was a fashionable restaurant and in front of the entrance there was a throng of elegant bourgeois couples, luxury cars and successful yuppies.

Inside, behind a desk with a bookings list, there was a young blonde girl, wearing glasses, her face fixed in a smile. Every so often, she called out the name of someone who was waiting in the line.

Will walked up to the desk and whispered in her ear that he was meeting Sara Turner. She looked at him for a moment

over her glasses, gave him a courteous smile and waved him through.

The place was enormous, busy, and noisy. Tucked in a corner, a jazz pianist played classics that no one appeared to be listening to, with all the chatting, laughing, and the clink of glasses and plates.

For a few seconds he scanned the room. There weren't any free tables and he couldn't make out anyone who could have been the person he was looking for.

He asked a waitress who directed him through the crowd to a room reserved for smokers.

The person who he found in front of him, if a little different, was really the woman from the photo. She was a gorgeous brunette who looked a lot younger than her age and, even from a sitting position, he could tell she had a statuesque figure. Her grey eyes radiated a kind of animalistic sensuality that hit him like a shock wave. Will stood still for a second, breathless, thinking with regret about all the years he'd spent in complete chastity.

She had just finished eating and now she was pensive, holding a glass of white wine with both hands, a sadness to her gaze. She seemed lost.

Finally, when he felt sure he had recuperated his cold manner, he coughed to get her attention.

She looked at him and, without changing her expression, invited him to sit down next to her. 'Good evening, detective, I'm sorry again to have disturbed you at this time on a Sunday but...'

'Don't worry, there's no problem.'

'What can I offer you?' she asked, in a formal tone.

‘Nothing, thank you.’

‘Not even anything to drink?’

‘No, really... thank you’

The woman thought about insisting. Then she lit a cigarette, took one or two drags, staining the filter with her lipstick, then she placed it on the edge of the ashtray and continued to stare at him impassively. It was as though she wanted to share a sentimental moment. It was obvious she didn’t know where to begin, and a shade of tension was visible all over her face.

‘Ok ma’am, what’s going on? What’s worrying you?’ he asked, in order to break the ice.

‘Look, detective...’

‘You can call me Will’

For a second she seemed to brighten, then she continued: ‘Look, Will, you don’t know me...’

‘Are you sure about that, Mrs Turner? Or should I be calling you Mrs Castle?’ he interrupted, smiling.

She didn’t give any kind of emotion away and, after a moment’s silence, she carried on talking: ‘Ah, so you already know! I should have imagined it, it’s your job, but I would have told you straightaway. When I called you, I didn’t want to give my husband’s name. You know, he’s in politics, and it’s best not to give names on the phone. Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Of course, I understand. That was the right thing. But now, tell, what’s going on? I’m starting to think this is something really serious’

‘My daughter Amy has been missing for four days!’

‘Four days, that’s a while, that’s a missing person case. Why have you not called the police?’

‘My husband doesn’t want me to. He doesn’t want his name associated with anything negative with the primaries

coming up. And anyway he's sure she's run away of her own accord.'

'How do you know that?'

'Listen, Amy isn't his child, I had her before we got married. You just need to know that they have an awful relationship and this is enough to convince him that she's simply left home.'

'In what sense awful?'

'They hate each other! It's hatred, pure and simple...it's an unmanageable situation.'

'How old is she?'

'Sixteen.'

'When did all this start?'

'Almost right after our marriage, she was eleven then.'

'So this has been going on for five years?'

'Yes, more or less.'

Will had started tearing at the edge of a napkin, looking for the right words to say next in what was turning into a sort of unpleasant interrogation. He nodded, cleared his throat and said: 'Do you know the reason behind this ...disagreement?'

'No, I've got no idea.'

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'I don't understand, detective, what are you trying to say?'

'I mean, are you sure that there's no.... sexual abuse involved?'

Sara looked shocked. Her eyes turned wet with emotion.

'Absolutely not... no, I don't think so' she replied, looking disturbed.

'Look, Ma'am, in these kind of cases the mothers are often the last to know'

She looked at him pleadingly. It was clear she'd never thought about anything of the kind.

'I can't believe it. I don't even want to think about it.'

'Ok. At this point, I would be obliged to talk to your husband too. If you don't want to do that, we can stop here and forget about it'. Will stopped talking, as if he was looking for a sensible solution. 'But, if you did want to carry on, I promise that I would be extremely discreet with the Senator.'

'Do what you need to do, detective. My daughter is the most important thing!' she replied, trying to calm herself down.

'Ok, let's try and get down to the details. I need a photo of the girl, preferably a recent one.'

'This was taken two weeks ago.'

Will looked at the photo for a moment. Amy was a pretty brunette, but nothing compared to her mother.

'Good' he said. 'Now, tell me about what happened when she disappeared.'

'Thursday afternoon she left for school, for her music course, but she never arrived. When I saw she hadn't come back, I called them, and they hadn't seen her.'

'Her cell?'

'She had it with her, it's been turned off.'

Will got out a notepad and began to take notes.

'Which school?'

'The Marcus Garvey school. She's a Sophomore.'

'Does she normally walk to school?'

'Part of the way, then she takes the tram.'

'Does she have a boyfriend?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Friends?'

'Just a few classmates.'

‘Does she have a computer?’

‘Yes, a laptop that she keeps in her room.’

‘I’ll have to examine that.’

‘You can come and get it tomorrow.’

‘Yes, ok, but I’d prefer not to meet your husband...’

‘No, he’s not here, he went to Boston this afternoon. I don’t know when he’ll be back, that’s why I insisted on seeing you right away.’

‘I understand. Please, Sara, I’m going to need Amy’s number, and those of your husband.’

‘My husband’s numbers... are you going to intercept him?’

‘No, that would be illegal. But they could be useful to see the outbound and inbound calls, so we can see who they’d been communicating with prior to the disappearance. It’s not a guarantee, but it needs to be done.’

When she’d finished writing them down, Will scanned the page, closed the notebook and put it back in his pocket.

‘I think that’s enough for now. I can come and get the computer tomorrow from your home, let’s say, around ten?’

‘Ok. And... I how much do you charge?’

‘I charge 300 a day plus expenses, but we can talk about that later, when I’ve got more of an idea what’s going on’ said Will, getting up.

‘Ok, no problem’ Sara replied. Then, after a moment of reflection, she added: ‘Please, tomorrow, when you come, don’t introduce yourself as a detective. I don’t want my husband to know for now.’

‘Don’t worry Ma’am. Goodnight.’

The crowd outside had disappeared. There were only a few taxis waiting at the end of the sidewalk.

It had stopped raining, but there was an icy wind and the air was wet. Will crossed the street, shiny under the neon lights, where he crouched in an alley, shivering in the cold.

Less than five minutes later, he saw her leave. The valet brought the car to the entrance. It was a beautiful black Corvette.

She tipped him, got in the driver's seat and left.

Will wrote the number plate down.

'You can never be too sure, beautiful lady', he murmured. He stepped back into the light and walked to the nearest taxi.

