



**A  
Kidnapping  
in  
Milan**

*The CIA  
on Trial*

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*To*

Rocco Chinnici, Giovanni Falcone,  
and Paolo Borsellino,  
who, to borrow from the last,  
died but once  
while others die every day.

Carlyle said “a lie cannot live.”  
It shows that he did not know how to tell them.

—*Mark Twain*

# Prelude

**NEAR THE BASILICA** di Sant’Ambrogio in Milan stands a column of rough stone erected by the Romans in the time of the Caesars. It is Corinthian in style, a fluted cylinder topped by leaves and scrolls. The flutes have not weathered the ages well, the leaves are chipped, the scrolls broken. On the lower part of the ruin are two holes a millennium and a half old and a hand’s breadth—or, to the point, a head’s breadth—apart. The Milanese say that if you put your nose to either hole, you can smell sulfur. Put your ear to one, and the roiling of Hell’s flames and the cries of its sufferers can be faintly heard. The holes were created by the horns of Satan—that is agreed. Beyond that, stories diverge. By one history, Satan came to Milan to lure Saint Ambrose, patron of the city, into deepest sin, but Ambrose would not be tempted, and in a fury *il Diavolo* sunk his horns into the column. Another story says the encounter between good and evil was more muscular, that Ambrose and Satan locked arms in a cataclysmic grapple and Ambrose threw Satan off with such force that his horns were lodged in the column. Another claim—completely scurrilous, the Milanese will tell you—is that the contest with Satan took place in the Holy Land, that its protagonist was not Ambrose but Christ, and that many years after Christ threw Satan headlong into the column, the column was imported to Milan.

In Milan a known fact is always explained by competing stories, more than one of which will be plausible. Some of the stories will be frivolous, even absurd. With time, the elements of all will mix, their separate origins becoming unclear. With time enough, even the one fact once known with certainty will become all but unknowable.

# A Kidnapping

**MILAN IS COLD** in winter. December slips over Monte Rosa from Switzerland, down the massif of the Pennine Alps and across the wide plain of the river Po, where Milan sits exposed. The winter lifts a dampness from the rice fields around the city, and the dampness makes the chill the ruder, but the Milanese, conditioned by two millennia of incursions, meteorological and otherwise, ignore the season. In January the sidewalk tables of the coffee bars on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II are filled with citizens and their guests, their dark coats buttoned to their necks, their hands, gloved in pliant leather, wrapped around espressos as if it were the normallest thing to be taking a *caffè* out of doors when other liquids begin to freeze. To be Milanese is to declare the business of life more important than a mere assault from God.

It was unremarkable, then, that on a cold day in the winter of 2003 a man passed a portion of his lunch hour on an inhospitable bench in a sad Milanese piazza named Dergano. Dergano once marked Milan's northern frontier but was now lost in the city's rambling, uncertain transition to suburb. The center of the piazza was asphalted, and thirty or forty cars were parked in rows orderly even by the standards of Milan, which believes itself less chaotic than the rest of Italy. Humanity, which is to say vivacity and interest, had been relegated to the piazza's periphery. There

were a few benches, which had been retouched by artists of the street and which sagged. There were a few trees, which, barren this time of year, added to the piazza's sorrow. On two of the piazza's sides stood unadorned modern buildings, their fronts covered in cheap marble of the kind known to the floors of discount stores worldwide, their occupants a large chain bank and larger chain grocery. The piazza's other sides had escaped the crime of modern architecture. Their buildings were simple but charming—plastered in gentle pastels, linteled in great blocks of stone, cheerfully inferential of lives they had seen. A bakery, a wine shop, and a small mobile phoney were housed there.

The man on the bench was of the indeterminate age between youth and decline, perhaps forty. His forehead had begun to wax, his scalp to wane, but gracefully; not for some years would he face the choice of shearing what hair remained or combing it over a bare dome. His build was casually athletic but with a padding of flesh bespeaking a desk job. When he smiled, which was not often today, the left corner of his mouth tugged slightly downward, as if a piece of him refused to surrender entirely to joy. His aspect was altogether ordinary, save in one respect: he had sandy, almost blond hair, a minor oddity in dark Italy.

Colleagues knew Luciano Pironi by his nom de guerre Ludwig. That he had a nom de guerre did not imply distinction. Ludwig was a mere *maresciallo*, a marshal, in the Carabinieri, a branch of the Italian Army once important but no longer. The Carabinieri take their name from the horseman's sidearm, the carbine, which likely takes its name, in corrupted form, from Calabria, in Italy's south. The Calabrians learned early that men with rifles light enough to be used at a gallop could give the next duchy over a good whacking. Today the Carabinieri only police Italy's cities, and that only partly. The State Police, what Americans might call the National Police if they had one, share the job. Each force pursues its own cases, interrogates its own suspects, and makes its own arrests. In theory they

divide their jurisdictions amicably, but sometimes one force withholds leads and witnesses from the other. There are two emergency phone numbers in Italy, 112 for the Carabinieri, 113 for the State Police. In a time of crisis, a citizen can pick his rescuer, and 113 is regarded the wiser choice. Other police agencies supersede the Carabinieri and State Police in certain fields, like the Finance Guard, which has jurisdiction over money laundering and smuggling. The multiplicity of police is a legacy of Mussolini, who slept poorly in his ducal bed if he thought he had given one force too many guns or too much opportunity to use them. He carved off authority and built rivalries with the same fevered inefficiency with which he built oversized train stations. The multiple forces survived because they fit the Italian condition: Italy was not unified until the late nineteenth century, and then only grudgingly. Italians have never trusted their national government nor, in the main, each other. The political birthright of the Italian is suspicion.

The most visible of the Carabinieri are foot patrols. They wear uniforms of black with red stripes down their pants and white sashes across their chests that shine at a distance but are dingy up close. They patrol in pairs so that, as Italians say, there will be one who can read, one who can write. *To be a carabiniere*, in idiomatic Italian, is *to be a martinet*. That life, however, was not for Ludwig. He belonged to a unit of plain-clothed Carabinieri detectives, the Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale, the Special Operations Group, which had been created in 1990 to combat the Mafia and terrorists. In Milan, the ROS was concerned mainly with terrorists. The ROS might almost have been considered elite, except that little that was attached to the Carabinieri bore elitism's happy stigma. Hence the noms de guerre, originally adopted to make it harder for criminals to harm lawmen but maintained, in part, to give an air of importance to a job that lacked it. Luigi had become Ludwig because of Teutonic origins: his mother was German, his father Italian; German had been his first language. He had colleagues who had taken

the names Hyena and Brasco, as in Donnie Brasco, the undercover FBI agent played on screen by a virile Johnny Depp. “Ludwig,” shading to the commonplace, suggested a calmer temperament.

Like any carabinieri with talent, Ludwig believed he had been misplaced. He thought his rightful home was SISMI, the Servizio per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare, or Military Intelligence and Security Service. Like ROS, SISMI fought terrorists, but did so with more prestige. The officers of SISMI were spies, not police, and they worked against enemies both at home and abroad—a burden which in America was shared by the CIA, FBI, Secret Service, and others. It was not easy for a carabinieri to join SISMI. Merit mattered, but merit was rarely enough, and it helped to have a patron or friend on the inside.

As it happened, Ludwig had a well-placed friend, an American named Bob, who was highly regarded by the director of SISMI’s Milan office and who was also known, favorably it seemed, at SISMI’s headquarters in Rome. Bob could expect that any recommendation he made would be looked on with respect. He was a spy. It also happened that Bob needed a favor, the subject of which he first raised with Ludwig, glancingly, in August of 2002, five months before Ludwig came to the cold bench in Piazza Dergano. April may have been the cruelest month in Eliot’s Europe, but in Milan it was August. The Milanese, like certain Amazonian tribes, hardly know the air conditioner, and in high summer those who do not decamp to Liguria to fight for a towel’s breadth of sand stay home and roast *au jus*. Criminals are among those who stay, so lawmen do too.

That August, while their wives were in diaspora, Ludwig and Bob often met for lunch or dinner in Piazza Risorgimento, which was in a more pleasant quarter than Dergano. They favored a pizzeria named Tosca, whose virtues included tables that, unlike in most Milanese restaurants, did not abut conjugally. At Tosca a gentlewoman might venture to the powder room without having to choose between sucking in her intestines or becoming intimate

with the shoulder blades of six strangers, and a cop and a spy could talk business without holding a town hall meeting. At one of their lunches, Bob told Ludwig that an informer had tipped him to a terrorist plot. The leader of the plot was Osama Mustafa Hassan Nasr, more commonly called Abu Omar, an Egyptian who lived in exile in Milan and had a violent interpretation of the Quran. Bob believed that Abu Omar ran a terrorist network that recruited and sent men from northern Italy to the Middle East to wage jihad. He was also plotting to hijack or in some other way attack a bus from the American School of Milan, where children of the American and European diplomatic and plutocratic classes were educated. (Their campus was located, with not a little irony, on Via Karl Marx.) Ludwig had heard of Abu Omar before but had known only that he was being investigated by yet another arm of Italian justice, the *Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali*, the Division of General Investigations and Special Operations. DIGOS, another counterterrorist agency that was more prestigious than ROS, was something like a big-city detective unit with the national reach of the FBI. Bob said little more of Abu Omar at that lunch and not much about him in succeeding lunches, but in December he told Ludwig he was assembling a team to seize the Egyptian, and he asked Ludwig to join it. Ludwig asked what he would have to do.

Bob explained that Abu Omar was a man of regular religious habits and rarely missed the noon prayers at his mosque. Nearly every day he descended from his apartment on Via Conte Verde, walked the couple of blocks west through Piazza Dergano, turned south onto Via Ciaia, which angled into Via Guerzoni, then turned west onto Viale Jenner, where his mosque stood. The entire walk took five or six minutes. Most days Abu Omar left his apartment a few minutes before noon, although some days he left earlier. Ludwig, if he agreed to help, would go to Piazza Dergano at ten o'clock on a morning that Bob would name and would wait for a call on a mobile phone Bob would give him. When the call came, he would walk to Via Guerzoni and wait for Abu Omar, who would

be easy to spot. An Arab with a long, bushy beard, he always wore a light-colored *galabia*, the traditional tunic-like garment of his people, and a *taqiyah*, or skullcap. Ludwig would stop him, show his police credentials, and ask to see his identity papers. Because Ludwig was a cop, he would know how to make the stop seem real, and should passersby or another cop happen along, Ludwig could shoo them away with authority. Ludwig needn't worry, however, that Abu Omar would be under surveillance by DIGOS that day. Bob would see that he was not being followed. While Ludwig inspected Abu Omar's papers, others on the team would "collect" the Egyptian and take him elsewhere for interrogation. Bob hoped his people would get "actionable intelligence" from Abu Omar, but not only that. They would also try to convince him to become their spy, which would be quite an accomplishment, since Western intelligence agencies had failed badly at recruiting moles from among the Islamic terrorists of Europe. Bob did not say what might convince Abu Omar to turn coat on his fellow terrorists. He also said he might need to send Ludwig to Piazza Dergano more than once because conditions might not be right for intercepting Abu Omar the first time. Maybe there would be too many people on the street, or maybe Abu Omar would have the flu and stay home. In such an event, Ludwig would receive no call on the mobile phone, and at one o'clock he could leave Dergano. Bob would send him back another day.

Bob, Ludwig knew, had already spoken well of him to the SISMI chief in Milan, and now Bob let Ludwig know that if he took this assignment, SISMI would learn even more about his worth. It was a deft pitch, fit for a CIA manual: a small task, easy in itself but part of a more important whole and sweetened with a personal incentive. Ludwig did not need much convincing. He accepted, asking only that, if possible, the job take place on the weekend because during the week it would be hard to explain an absence of three or four hours to his superiors. (Ludwig knew without Bob's saying

that he was not to explain his noonlighting to his superiors.) Bob said he would try for a weekend but could make no promises.

After lunch, Ludwig went to the ROS office, looked up the file on Abu Omar, and found his picture as Bob had described him. The file was otherwise unremarkable and made little impression on him.

In January, Bob gave Ludwig the cell phone he had mentioned, and a few days later he told Ludwig to go to Dergano next Monday, January 27, 2003. Come the day, Ludwig excused himself from his office and drove to Dergano on his scooter. He found a neighborhood bar, which in Milan is a place that sells both stimulant and stupeficient—coffee and alcohol—and in its typical form is barely wider than an aircraft lavatory and furnished almost as minimally, although occasionally there will be a flourish of something dramatic like a table or chair. A Milanese takes his coffee standing up, at the bar proper, where a brass foot rail takes the place of a seat. A drinker who sits doubles his price, and the workaday Milanese refuses to pay for real estate when he needs only caffeine. Ludwig took his place at the footrail, ordered his drink, and drew it out as long as he could. He may have been reduced to ordering from the sandwiches that in Milanese bars have been dressed years in advance and are heated when ordered—a gastronomic improvement, but just, over cardboard. Eventually he left and strolled about, never straying more than a few blocks from the piazza. Later he took to the bench, where the entertainment was slim and the minutes expired slowly. At one o'clock, no call having come, he returned to his scooter.

A week later Bob asked Ludwig to go to Piazza Dergano the coming Sunday. Again Ludwig went, but again there was no call. And so the following Sunday.

**AT THREE** in the afternoon on January 13, 2003, a man whose name was not Massimo but who will be called that here, was ruing the start of the week. The radiator in his office was, in the Italian