

## CHAPTER 8

Milan, Italy | June 1979

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Archbishop Tagliente was seated in an elegant sitting room of a 19th century villa within the town of Frascati. He arrived only an hour earlier. Dusk was already turning to night as the sun settled behind the hills. Only twenty kilometers southeast from Rome's Termini railway station, Frascati was easily assessable by local train in thirty minutes. A delightful town situated in the hills with Rome viewed from its advantageous elevation.

While Tagliente enjoyed a single malt Scotch whisky, an elegant woman walked into the room holding a glass of red wine. She wore an ankle-length designer silk robe offset by a string of pearls. A diamond bracelet adorned her wrist. With a stylish coiffure and minimal makeup, her face with its olive complexion looked years less than her sixty years.

Coming to sit next to Tagliente on their favorite loveseat, Isabella Leonardi said, "Angelina is preparing us rare Florentine steaks with risotto for dinner. This full-bodied Tuscana Rosso will pair perfectly. I missed you this weekend, Marcello. Your call mentioned something unexpected would delay you coming until today. Is everything under control?"

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Quite the contrary, things were decidedly not under control. The stolen document photocopies recovered from the journalist only bought time if the woman survived. That remained highly probable from the earliest reports received from sources within the hospital. After twenty-four hours, the woman's status remained critical based largely on the unknown extent of her head trauma, but her vital signs were strong. That meant she would recover with renewed vengeance. The missing Vatican Secret Archive documents would be used to bolster allegations against Marcinkus and the Vatican Bank. It would establish a long participatory relationship with Michele Sindona then later with Roberto Calvi and the growing Banco Ambrosiano financial disaster.

Those revelations might be weathered by sacrificing Marcinkus. Yet that was not likely to happen given Pope John Paul II's support of Marcinkus. Revealing the complicity of Pope Paul VI in sordid financial crimes was a far more inflammatory matter reflecting even on the papacy of current Pope John Paul II. Coming on the heels of suspicious circumstances surrounding the unexpected death of Pope John Paul I after only several weeks following his election could only exacerbate conspiracy rhetoric with Marcinkus' dismissal claimed as a cover up or scapegoat.

Pope John Paul I's death was a totally mishandled sequence of events, largely the fault of French Cardinal Secretary of State Jean-Marie Villot. As *Camerlengo*, Villot acted as the interim administrator of the Holy See during a papal vacancy with the interregnums of 1978 following the deaths of Paul VI and John Paul I. Among Villot's several mistakes were authorizing embalming of John Paul I. This gave rise to various conspiracy theories. How did a seemingly healthy man of sixty-five die suddenly in his sleep? With the remains embalmed before examination by medical experts, speculation about poisoning abounded.

Coupled with rumor that John Paul I was about to dismiss Bishop Marcinkus as president of the Vatican Bank made Marcinkus a possible suspect in foul play. Cardinal Villot himself then died of pneumonia in March of 1979 just five months after Pope John Paul I's death. Villot's mistakes and any expectation of resolving the mysterious death of John Paul I died with him.

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Tagliente's Holy alliance agents investigated the death of the pontiff. They found no credible evidence of poisoning. Possibly an accidental dose of blood thinning medication by the pontiff himself. Known only to those few close to him, Pope John Paul I suffered from chronic circulatory problems evident by severe swelling of his legs. Embalming without first taking blood samples then the internment of the remains eliminated ruling out poisoning, therefore rumors persisted.

Following Villoot's death, Tagliente briefed John Paul II on everything he was able to learn. Pope John Paul I most likely died of natural causes, possibly exacerbated by accidental overdose. No evidence of foul play. The incidents feeding the rumors came from unfortunate actions taken in covering up how, when, and by whom the deceased pontiff was found along with other misleading or inaccurate information. Tagliente assured John Paul II that Marcinkus had nothing to do with his predecessor's death. Pope John Paul II was immensely relieved and thanked Tagliente profusely for his service. While Tagliente believed Marcinkus innocent, Marcinkus would undoubtedly find out that Tagliente's support with the new pope proved invaluable. Brash American Bishop Paul Marcinkus was not popular with many prelates, therefore Tagliente became an important ally given his stature with the new pope.

What concerned Tagliente was the extent to which the missing documents made the case for the Vatican's connection with the Mafia. That connection, although buried in layers of misleading transactions by Calvi's bank using offshore holding companies, the paper trail nevertheless existed. Ever the realist, Tagliente knew that the failure to remove Emma Nicoletti held dire threat. Beyond the negative implications for the Holy See, the manifest unholy alliance with organized crime was an exceedingly important source of revenue. The Vatican Bank must remain a unique offshore tax haven with broad recognition as a place of financial trust in order to exercise financial transactions in international markets.

Tagliente smiled at Isabella, "Nothing is ever completely under control within the Vatican. Undoubtedly no different than with any government. The difference being Vatican institutions function under archaic patterns of ill-defined authority. To those

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on the outside, it is byzantine, secretive, and accustomed to silence."

Isabella added, "And your place in this menagerie of old men is the most secretive of all. Few within Vatican City even know what you do. The fact that you even shared with me that you are the dark prince of the ultra-secretive Vatican secret service attests to your love and generosity for me. I have learned never to intrude by asking details."

Tagliente reached over and squeezed her hand. "You enrich my life beyond measure, Isabella. A woman of expansive perception. A worldliness about you. A remarkable range of intellect. Accomplished musician. Courageous enough to understand why I have forsaken the vow of celibacy because of you. Confident enough to pursue a most unusual relationship laden with inconvenient secrecy."

They kissed. "Perhaps you can get away for a week to come to Como as the summer progresses."

Leonardi made her home in a magnificent villa on the west bank of Lake Como. Much cooler summers than Rome where Marcello could go about incognito under an assumed name. Frascati served the same refuge while being only thirty minutes by train from Rome. She purchased the Frascati villa after what began as an affair in 1963 soon transformed into a lasting relationship. A transformative relationship for both her and Marcello.

Isabella Leonardi became a widow less than a year before meeting Tagliente. While the marriage to a handsome but philandering playboy scion of a wealthy industrial family was probably doomed for failure, his unexpected death still proved emotionally jarring. The crash of his new Ferrari 330 while exercising its handling performance on the winding Les Corniche roads in the hills above Monaco occurred while she was performing at a concert in Genoa.

Her former husband held a marketing position in his family's industrial holdings. She was forty-three at the time. Well-established in her musical career as first violinist for the Milan Symphony Orchestra. Having studied at the prestigious Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan, she began her performing career with the orchestra of the La Scala Opera in 1942. World War

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Two erupted only a few months earlier when Mussolini foolishly joined Hitler in declaring war on the United States. A difficult time for a professional musician to maintain proficiency. With performance venues under constant threat during the eighteen months of German occupation following invasion of the Italian mainland by American and British forces, she adapted to another period of adjustment by resuming her career in 1945 in heavily damaged Italy.

For Marcello Tagliente, the new pontiff Paul VI, formerly Cardinal Giovanni Montini, immediately elevated him from monsignor to bishop. He worked closely with then Monsignor Montini in the Vatican Secretariat of State office during the pontificate of Pius XII, then through the five years of John XXIII's reign. More importantly, Pope Paul resurrected the Holy Alliance after being held in abeyance during the pontificate of John XXIII. Paul VI had need of a trusted ally functioning beyond the control of the powerful Roman Curia. Adding further to the secrecy of the Holy Alliance, the pope let it be known unofficially that his private secretary Monsignor Pasquale Macchi would oversee its operations. Yet the pope left no doubt that operational direction of the Vatican secret service resided with the experienced Tagliente leaving Macchi to focus on his demanding role as papal secretary. Pope Paul understood that leaving the lines of authority unclear provided him greater autonomy from interference by the Curia.

It was Montini that had assisted German Bishop Alois Hudal and Croatian priest Father Krunoslav Draganović through Tagliente as intermediary in establishing the Vatican Ratlines in the post-war years. Now as pope, Montini understood the wider usefulness of the Holy Alliance and Monsignor Marcello Tagliente.

To explain the elevation of Tagliente to bishop, Tagliente was given a position within the Vatican Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, the APSA. This separate financial institution from the Vatican Bank acted as the treasury and central bank of Vatican City and the Holy See under direction of the Curia. Tagliente's academic education in economics made that assignment explainable. It also allowed Tagliente to officially continue his service within the Secretariat of State reporting to the

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aging Cardinal Amleto Giovanni Cicognani who additionally occupied the dual roles of cardinal secretary of state and president of the APSA. A striking example of the complexity of lines of authority within the internal workings of the Vatican.



Isabella Leonardi was drawn to Tagliente when first meeting him at a benefit orchestral performance hosted by the Bank of Italy at the Jesuit church Oratorio del Caravita on the Via Corso in Rome in 1968. Escorted that evening by her father, she performed as the featured soloist with the Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. Alessandro Leonardi was a respected gentleman of stature well-connected to the Roman Catholic Church and a confidant to Giovanni Montini from when Montini was Archbishop of Milan before elevation to pope.

Leonardi's father was the managing director of the investment management division of Italy's largest insurance company Assicurazioni Generali. The Leonardi family descended from old Italian banking wealth from 18th century ancestors associated with the five-hundred-year-old Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena. In the 20th century Alessandro Leonardi had dealings with Bernardino Nogara, the architect of the modern international scope of Vatican finances and responsible for establishing the Vatican Bank in 1942 under Pope Pius XII.

At the reception following the performance, Alessandro Leonardi guided his daughter toward two church prelates. Both were dressed in black clerical ecclesiastical suits with white reverse collars and the zucchetto skull cap denoting rank within the Roman Catholic Church. Scarlet for the older cleric a cardinal, violet known as amaranth for the taller younger cleric a bishop or archbishop. The diminutive older cleric probably in his eighties seemed almost weighed down by a large gold pectoral cross. The tall handsome fit younger priest appeared in his forties.

Alessandro Leonardi said, "Your Eminence and Your Excellency, may I introduce my daughter Isabella. My dear, this Vatican Cardinal Secretary of State Amleto Cicognani. Effectively the chief of staff for the Vatican. And this is Bishop Marcello

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Tagliente associated with the Section for Relations with States within the Secretariat. Something much like a foreign ministry. My congratulations on your elevation, Bishop Tagliente."

Following her father's lead, Isabella kissed the rings of the hands offered by both prelates in the Catholic custom of *baciamento*, a way of demonstrating reverence for the bishop's office and the individual being greeted. She and Tagliente locked their eyes for a moment longer than necessary. Both would later remark on that auspicious beginning of their romance.

Cicognani said, "I enjoyed your performance immensely, Signora Leonardi."

Tagliente offered, "A remarkable performance, Signora Leonardi. I particularly appreciate violin concertos. Mendelssohn's concerto in E minor is a favorite. Your interpretation conveys the true beauty of the composer's vision of the piece to the listener. Seamless transitions. You play sections slower than many soloists today, allowing us to hear nuances otherwise easily missed. Choosing Paganini's *Devil's Laughter* caprice as an encore made a perfect conclusion."

"Oh, my, you recognized it even by name! You know something about great music, Bishop Tagliente."

"Not really, Signora Leonardi. I just appreciate the art of the great composers and a musician talented enough to bring that art to life. Where do you usually perform?"

"Mostly in the north. Milan usually. Summer is more tolerable in Milan than Rome."

Both Tagliente and Leonardi were smitten. Both mature enough to understand the difficulties of such a relationship while confident enough to forge ahead.

Following that first meeting they immediately began engaging in frequent contact by spending considerable hours on the telephone over several weeks. Correspondence was out of the question. They must avoid any paper trail. Eventually their increasing desire culminated with Tagliente finding an official reason to go to Milan. Listening to violin pieces of the great masters was Tagliente's daily routine for relaxing. Learning that Isabella owned a highly respected 150-year-old violin manufacturing firm located in Cremona, he used that as a reason to pay her a visit. From Cremona they drove to Isabella Leonardi's principal

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residence, a villa on the west bank of Lake Como. That first romantic weekend began their long secret relationship.

Isabella Leonardi was a wealthy aristocratic widow of the landed aristocracy with old money stretching back to the 19th century. Like Tagliente, a family heritage of the Black Nobility. His same age. No baggage such as children or former husbands. Charming. Intelligent. Artistic. Well-read. Active in Catholic charities. Both understood the restrictions of their relationship requiring well-crafted secrecy.

Early into their relationship Tagliente candidly rationalizes to Leonardi, "I do not believe our relationship to be a sin. Nor should you. To the contrary, it is a gift from God. That it goes against my vow of chastity is obvious. God may condemn my lapse of the vow of celibacy but not our intimate relationship. Chastity is an ecclesiastical law that was adopted in the Middle Ages by the Roman Catholic Church. Created by man for secular reasons rather than ordained by God. Devotion to the service of God's work is the true measure of my ordination. I stand ready to be judged accordingly by the Creator."



Isabella Leonardi knew little of Tagliente's professional life serving in the Vatican. When he spoke about the roles of other prelates, as an outsider it was difficult for her to understand what he did. Tagliente intentionally avoided relating anything substantive making the function of the Vatican secret service opaque. Never passing along rumor, he confessed to her that he had a reputation of being self-absorbed, even unfriendly. She detected if that reputation was accurate, it did not bother him. He was self-absorbed. In that she felt herself a special exception with what he did reveal to her. While guarded, he shared enough for her to feel his unqualified trust.

That trust best exemplified by his sharing of the important secret roles he occupied. Head of the Vatican Secret Services and the Vatican Secret Archive. Recently he acquired the added responsibility of assisting in managing the public relations crisis of involvement of the Vatican Bank in the international Italian Banking Scandal. He had served several popes from Pius XII to



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John XXIII, to Paul VI, then John Paul I, now John Paul II. Each of these very different pontiffs invested trust in Marcello Tagliente for his considerable skills in managing difficult situations.

Having revealed to Isabella his responsibilities for running Vatican intelligence, Tagliente educated her in its background as a way of sharing the importance of his responsibilities.

"Santa Alleanza was founded in the 16th century. The Holy See from that time until the Risorgimento, the unification of Italy a hundred years ago, was a sovereign country. The Papal States occupied a central portion of the Italian mainland. However, the Roman Catholic pope played a secular political role with the Church dominating most religious life in western Europe.

"As such, intelligence was vital for the dealings of the pontiff with international affairs of state. The pope went far beyond just meddling in the activities of Catholic nations using the power of his spiritual status. He possessed a virtual army of intelligence sources in Catholic priests and monks throughout the western world. The pope also had papal envoys now called apostolic nuncios, equivalent to ambassadors to important nations. I started my ecclesiastical career in the Vatican Secretariat of State. With my academic background in economics and international law, I began working in the Section for Relations with States, the Vatican equivalent to a foreign ministry.

"With fluency in Italian, English and German, I immediately became involved as a liaison for apostolic nuncios. By definition, the gathering and use of the natural flow of politically related information is an intelligence function. Writing reports eventually led to requests for broader interpretive editorials. Intelligence analysis. Knowledge is power. The pontiff plays a secular role in the world even today. Broad based intelligence is vital for the Holy See to effectively exercise its spiritual influence."

While she knew his areas of responsibility functioned separately from administrative control by the Roman Curia, she knew almost nothing related to any specifics. Marcello was careful never to divulge confidential information as a matter of ethical principle. He once told her that she had no reason to know sensitive Vatican information. He softened his comment by citing the analogy about not wanting to know how sausage is made.

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The details were his burden of office in service to the Church. Impossible to relate unpleasant aspects of Vatican intelligence work to an outsider that would question the necessary utility for a religious institution.

While secretive about what he did, to Isabella he was expansive in sharing his personal views on why he chose the priesthood as a chosen career. Without him stating in specific words, she believed she understood some of the underlying reasons. A conservative powerful family closely aligned with the Roman Catholic Church. A favorite uncle, a bishop, serving in the Secretariat of State office under Pope Pius X. A great uncle a retired archbishop. Tagliente must have undoubtedly gravitated to the grandeur and universal power of the Roman Catholic Church. For an Italian with family close to the apex of power within the Vatican hierarchy, it must have represented almost a family profession.

In his own words he summarized his philosophical makeup. "I believe in the biblical God and Jesus Christ. I am politically conservative and that generally applies to my religious views. However, my conservatism is more personalized. It is conditional. I am governed by logic. Realistic about changing circumstances where the Church must adapt to remain relevant. I do not feel bound by every element of dogma. For example, while not aligned with John XXIII's left-leaning populist pontificate, the Second Vatican Council was necessary to move the Church into the 20th century. The Latin mass had become anachronistic.

"So is the concept that the pope is infallible. I believe God *may* speak through him, but I do not believe in the doctrine of papal infallibility. The pope is just a man with all that represents. I do not believe the hand of God dictates the selection of a pope from a body of imperfect cardinals voting in conclave.

"Celibacy of the clergy is unnatural. Designed as a mechanism to bind priests to the Church as a means of signifying their elevated status from the faithful. Not even dogma. It was made mandatory by ecclesiastical law in the Middle Ages for practical rather than religious reasons. I find no personal fault in my disregarding its observance. God has set us together, Isabella. That cannot be deemed a sacrilege."

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A doctor bent down to look into Emma Nicoletti's eyes as she sat propped up in the hospital bed of the *Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli*. "How are the headaches?"

"Not as frequent. Less intense but that may be because of the medication that helps a lot."

"Any problems with vision or hand coordination?"

"No. Worse discomfort is my shoulder."

"Well, it has only been days since the injury. No swelling of the brain so no indication of internal cranial bleeding. Still could be residual effects for some time. I will let Doctor Ferrero comment on your other injuries."

What most concerned Nicoletti was the laceration on her cheek. It ran from just under her left cheekbone for about four centimeters downward. She had not seen how bad it was or the scarring prognosis. She saw the lacerations on her left arm when the nurse changed the dressing. They made her shudder at what the implications might be for the facial laceration. Fortunately, as she approached her car to get into the passenger seat, she had fumbled with balancing the cardboard tray of sandwiches and coffees. This caused her to stop behind the car parked next to hers to let Gabriel back out her car. In that process her body became turned away from much of the direct blast force. The injuries would have been significantly worse had she taken the blast force full-frontal.

Replaying events brought a twinge of guilt for worrying over scarring while Gabriel died. Made all the worse by newspaper accounts of his incineration but at least already dead from the blast effects of the explosion.

After the doctor left, two men entering her room, causing her to exclaim, "Michael! Thank you for coming. I'm so sorry!" She burst into sobs as Gabriel's brother Michael approached her bed and reached for her right hand while kissing her on the forehead.

After several minutes waiting for Nicoletti to regain her composure, Eisenberg said, "This is Frank Amatrano. A close friend going back to our college days. Gabe asked me to give him a call. Frank has a background in government security and

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criminal investigation. Currently works for Interpol at their headquarters outside Paris."

Nicoletti nodded to Amatrano, but the tears begin to flow again as she said to Eisenberg, "I feel so responsible bringing Gabe into this mess. Should have known what we were doing threatened a lot of bad people."

Eisenberg held tightly to her hand. "Not your fault, Emma. Like you, Gabe was a tenacious investigative journalist. Had he known he was in danger, he would have proceeded anyway."

Amatrano said in Italian, "Do you have any idea who might have done this, Signora Nicoletti?"

Somewhat surprised, she replied, "You speak Italian like a native Italian."

"I am a native. Born in Genoa. My given name is Francesco. Anglicized to Frank. I have both American and Italian citizenships. So, you do not believe this was a terrorist bombing by the *Red Brigades*?"

"No. There is no reason. I work for a financial newspaper. Not a high-profile target for Marxists."

Amatrano said, "Gabriel telephoned me. Said you were working together on a new project involving the Italian Banking Scandal. Mentioned the names of Michele Sindona, Roberto Calvi, and the Vatican Bank. Do you believe the bombing might be involved with that?"

"Possibly. No, probably."

"Why probably?"

Nicoletti lowered her head but remained silent.

"Signora. This was an assassination. Whatever you were doing is the reason. Cost Gabriel his life. You survived only by chance circumstances. I also know quite a lot about this Italian Banking Scandal. However, I'm not allowed to discuss official confidential police investigative information. By the way, I'm not a police officer. Interpol is strictly an international investigative organization assisting law enforcement agencies of its signatory member nations."

"That is not very comforting given the inability of Italian law enforcement to suppress recurring widespread acts of violence. Makes a journalist consider that corruption may be involved."

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"I understand completely, Signora Nicoletti. Reason enough for trusting an investigative outsider. I work in Paris and come to Genoa occasionally to visit relatives when I travel to Italy on official business. I offered to visit you and Gabriel in Milan unofficially. Gabriel asked if I might assist with how you might expand your research with Italian law enforcement. I'm also aware there are certain compromised Italian law enforcement officials to avoid, if you understand my meaning. I have both a professional and personal connection to Gabriel Eisenberg's murder. Now perhaps I can be of assistance with navigating your interaction with Italian authorities. I have professional relationships within the *Guardia di Finanza*. Trusted senior officers I have worked with for years."

Nicoletti looked at Amatrano. Never in her life had she felt so unsettled. Uncertain how to proceed. Should she trust this Interpol official?

Amatrano continued, "You are still in danger, Signora Nicoletti. Whoever ordered your killing knows you are now of even greater threat. Gabriel said you came into possession of confidential documents implicating the Vatican Bank's involvement in money laundering. Is that what this is about?"

Nicoletti nodded, "But how did they know?"

"Who do you mean as *they*?"

"Somebody in the Vatican Secret Archive undoubtedly."

"Is that the origin of these documents?"

"Yes."

"What makes these documents so important?"

"They directly implicate the president of the Vatican Bank Bishop Paul Marcinkus as a willing participant in the financial crimes by Sindona and Calvi. Since Sindona has known connections with the Sicilian Mafia, it may lead to evidence of the Vatican Bank participating in money laundering for organized crime. That needs further investigation to integrate the Vatican documents with other known information to make a convincing case. Many of the documents have the signature of Pope Paul VI. You may not know this, but the Vatican Secret Archive is just that. Secret. Exceptionally limited access. It is not part of the Vatican Library. The secret archive is the personal repository of the cur-

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rent pontiff. Few areas in the already hyper-secret Vatican are as inaccessible.”

“How did you come by these documents?”

Nicolette thought for a moment before answering, “I’d rather not say. I feel obligated to protect my source.”

“I understand. I will return tomorrow. We can talk further. I told Gabriel I would come here to lend assistance. Seems now my mission has changed. Keeping you safe becomes the priority. Where are these documents?”

“In my apartment. Photocopies. Originals are safe in a Swiss bank vault.”

“Has anyone checked your apartment since the bombing?”

Nicoletti closed her eyes. Traumatized by the shock of Gabriel Eisenberg’s horrible death and her own injuries, she had not considered that. “No.”

“If the documents are missing that confirms the likely reason for the assassination attempt. Certainly, dispels this as a terrorist attack by the *Red Brigades*. Would you like me to check your apartment?”

Nicoletti nodded, “Yes. I would appreciate you doing that. Not yet ready to trust Italian police. My address and apartment key are in my handbag in the closet over there. The Vatican documents are in the bottom drawer of my office file cabinet. Thank you, Signore Amatrano.”



As Frank Amatrano and Michael Eisenberg left Nicoletti’s room, a nurse followed them out. Stopping at the reception desk for admitting visitors, the nurse asked the attending clerk, “Who were the visitors to the patient Nicoletti in room 308?”

Looking over the visitor signing in log, the clerk said, “Francesco Amatrano and Michael Eisenberg.”

The nurse then went to a payphone and reported the names as instructed.