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A Novel

JAMES PATTERSON

WOMAN OF GOD

& MAXINE PAETRO

WOMAN OF GOD

**JAMES PATTERSON
AND
MAXINE PAETRO**



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*Dedicated to the selfless doctors and
humanitarians who travel to the world's most
dangerous places to help those in need.*

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PROLOGUE

Twenty Years From Now

One Vatican City

THE STORY had begun deep inside the Vatican, had leaked out into the city of Rome, and within days had whipped around the globe with the momentum of a biblical prophecy. If true, it would transform not only the Roman Catholic Church but all of Christianity, and possibly history.

Today was Easter Sunday. The sun was bright, almost blinding, as it glanced off the ancient and sacred buildings of Vatican City.

A tall, dark-haired man stood between towering statues on the colonnade, the overlook above St. Peter's Square. He wore Ray-Bans under the bill of his cap, a casual blue jacket, a denim shirt, workaday jeans, and combat boots. The press corps milled and chatted behind him, but writer Zachary Graham was transfixed by the hundreds of thousands of people packed together in the square below like one enormous single-cell organism.

The sight both moved him and made him sick with worry. Terrifying, unprecedented events were happening around the world: famines and floods and violent weather patterns, compounded by wars and other untethered forms of human destruction.

The *New York Times* had flown Graham to Rome to cover Easter in the Vatican and what might be the last days in the life of an aging Pope Gregory XVII. The pope was a kind and pious man, beloved everywhere, but since Graham's arrival in Rome four days ago, he had seen the sadness over the pope's imminent passing and, not long after, his death eclipsed by a

provocative rumor, which if true would be not just the turning point in one of the world's great religions and the explosion of a media bomb, but, to Zachary Graham, a deeply personal event.

Graham had been born in Minnesota forty-five years before. He was the eldest son of a middle school teacher and a Baptist minister. He was no fan of organized religion, but he was fair minded. He was a brilliant writer, highly respected by his peers, and clearly the right person for this job—which was why the *Times*, still the preeminent news machine of the twenty-first century, had sent him.

Now, as he stood in the shadows of Bernini's massive statuary, watching the crowd show signs of panic, Graham knew it was time to go to ground.

He walked twenty yards along the overlook, stopping at the small, cagelike lift. Other reporters followed him, cramming themselves into the rickety elevator. The doors screeched shut. Graham pressed the Down button, and the car jiggled and lurched toward the plaza below.

From there, Graham walked north through the colonnade, the harsh light throwing contrasting blocks of sharp shadow onto the worn stones. Moving quickly, he exited through the shifting crowd in St. Peter's Square and headed toward an alley off Via della Conciliazione, where the mobile production trucks were behind barricades, tightly parked in a bumper-to-bumper scrum.

Graham flashed his credentials to get through security, then opened one of the rear doors of a white panel van.

He peered over a sound man's shoulder at the large monitor and read so many expressions on the faces in the crowd: fear, desperation, and fervent hope that the new pope would bring much-needed change.

From the election of the very first "vicar of Christ," to the current Holy See, the pope had always been God's representative on earth—a man. Could it be true that Gregory's successor would be a *woman*? The provocative, unsettling story that had once been just a whisper was taking on more certainty by the moment: the next pope would be an American lay priest by the name of Brigid Fitzgerald.

The possibility of a woman pope was extraordinary, astounding, and if it happened, the consequences would be profound.

Zachary Graham had done his homework.

Legend has it that in the year AD 855, a woman who had disguised herself as a man was elected pope. Three years later, while in a processional through Rome, this pope had gone into labor and given birth. She was immediately tied to the tail of a horse, dragged through the streets to her death. Her baby was also murdered, and the two of them were buried beneath the street where they died.

Given the absence of physical artifacts, this story had been officially dismissed by the Catholic Church as a Protestant story concocted to embarrass the Church and the Papacy. Yet there were etchings of Pope Joan and footnotes in a hundred ancient, illuminated manuscripts. There was even a small, disfigured shrine to Pope Joan on a small street not far from St. Peter's Square.

This old story troubled Graham's soul. It was why he was afraid for Brigid when people spoke of her as "miraculous," and why for so long he had been unable to find satisfaction or love or even sleep.

Graham took a chair in front of the screen displaying those rapt, excited, tormented faces and carefully considered his options.

Should he wait, observe, and report the facts that were unfolding before him? Should he do his job? Or should he commit journalism's greatest sin by interfering in this true epic drama? If he did that, he might very well change the outcome.

Two

Cambridge, Massachusetts

I WAS trying to get my seven-year-old, Gillian, ready for the day. She is a funny little girl, bratty and bright. And clever. And slippery. She's the apple, peach, and plum of my eye, and I love her to pieces. Thank you, God.

It was Easter Sunday, and Gilly was in the closet trying on various articles of clothing, some of which were actually hers, and she was telling me about her dream.

"I finally found out where the polar bears went."

"Oh. So, where did they go?"

She leaned out of the closet, showing me her darling face, her bouncing curls, and her bony shoulders.

"Gilly, you have to get dressed. Come on, now."

"They were on the *moon*, Mom. They were on the *moon*. And I was there. I had a special car with skis instead of wheels, and, even though it was nighttime, it was soooo bright that I could see the bears *everywhere*. You know why they're on the moon?"

"Why?" I said, lacing up my shoes.

"Because the moon is made of *ice*. The *ice* covers the oceans of the moon."

People had been talking about colonizing the moon for the better part of a hundred years. It was still an impossible hope. A total fantasy. But there it was every night, right up there, pristine, visible, and with historic human footprints still in the moon dust. And now Gilly's dreamed-up polar bears

were not facing earthly extinction. They were partying on the moon.

As Gilly, now back in the closet, told me, “the man in the moon” provided the bears with food and volleyball.

I laughed, thinking about that, and she said, “I’m not kidding, Mom.”

I was folding up the discarded clothes Gilly had flung all over the room when I heard her cry out for me.

“Honey, what is it? What?”

She came out of the closet showing me the blood coming from the web between her thumb and forefinger of her left hand. She still held a piece of broken lightbulb.

“It just rolled off the shelf and *broke*.”

“Let me see.”

She showed me the glass, with its sharp edges.

“No, silly, show me your *cut*.”

She held out her hand, and droplets of blood fell on the front of her chosen Easter dress, a froth of ruffled pink with an overskirt of spangled tulle. It was excruciating, the sweetness and the vulnerability of this little girl. I stifled my urge to cry and said, “Let’s fix this. Okay?”

A few minutes later, Gilly’s finger was washed and bandaged, the glass shards were in a box in the trash; and now I was focused again on the time.

Gilly wriggled into her second-best dress, a blue one with a sash of embroidered daisies.

“Gorgeous,” I said.

I stepped into my clean, white surplice, and, peering into a small mirror propped on the bookcase, I finger combed my unruly ginger hair.

“You look beautiful, Mom,” she said, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I grinned down at her. “Thank you. Now, put on your shoes.”

“We’re not late, you know.”

“Not yet, anyway. Let’s go, silly Gilly. Let’s go.”

Three

I BRACED myself, then Gilly and I stepped out onto the stoop.

The shifting crowd filling the street *roared*. Communicants, neighbors, people who had come here to catch a glimpse of me, ordinary people of every age and description, reached out their hands, lifted their babies, and chanted my name.

“Bri-gid! Bri-gid!”

I’d seen this outpouring of passion before, and still I wasn’t sure how to act. Sometimes the mood of a crowd turned dark. I’d seen that, too.

Gilly said, “Mom. You’ll be all right.”

She waved, and the crowd went wild again.

And then they pushed forward, toward the stoop. News broadcasters, megabloggers, televangelists, and entertainment-TV hosts pointed their microphones toward me, asking, “Brigid, are the rumors true? Have you gotten the call? Are you ready to go?”

I had answered their questions in the past but was always asked for more, and by now, I didn’t have any more. Gilly was too small to walk through this groundswell, so I hoisted her up, and with her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, I stepped carefully down to the street, where the crowd was at eye level.

“Hey, everyone,” I said as I waded into the river of people. “Beautiful Easter Sunday, isn’t it? I would stop to talk, but we have to get going. We’ll be late.”

“Just one question,” shouted Jason Beans, a reporter from the *Boston Globe* who liked to be called Papa. He was wearing a button on his lapel, the

single letter Y, which stood for the all-inclusive, universal question about everything: the heat waves, the long, frigid winters, the eerily brilliant sunsets, and ever-warming, rising seas. *Why?*

“We can walk and talk,” Beans was saying. He was standing between me and other reporters who were angling for their “just one question.”

I kind of liked the somewhat annoying Jason Beans, but Gilly and I couldn’t risk getting swallowed up by this crowd. We had to move.

“Have you gotten the call from the Vatican?” Beans asked.

“Aww, Papa. It’s a rumor, nothing more. And that’s the really big scoop. Now, pleeease pardon me. I have to go to church. I have a Mass to say.”

“Bri-gid! Bri-gid!”

Flowers flew at me, and hands grabbed at my skirts, and Jason Beans stepped in front of us and wedged open a path. Gilly and I drafted behind him. We crossed the street, and there, midblock, stood the grand brick church that had anchored this neighborhood for a century.

People crowded us from all directions, calling out, “We love you, Brigid. Brigid, will you remember us when you’re living in Rome?”

“I remember you right here and now, Luann. See you in church.”

By the time we reached the entrance to St. Paul’s, thousands were being funneled through the narrow streets, toward the entrance, and they understood that only a few hundred would fit inside the small neighborhood church. The panic was starting. They all wanted to see me.

Gilly was twisting in my arms, waving, laughing into the crook of my neck. “Mom, this is so great.”

With Beans acting as the tip of the spear, I entered the sacristy with my daughter still in my arms. I thanked the reporter, who shot his last, desperate questions at me.

I told him, “I’ll see you after Mass, Papa, I promise,” and closed the door.

I let Gilly down, and she fed our pet tabby cat, Birdie. Then my little girl ran out to the nave and squeezed her way into a front pew. I crossed myself, and, hoping that I would find the right words, I walked out to the altar.

The air was supercharged with expectation.