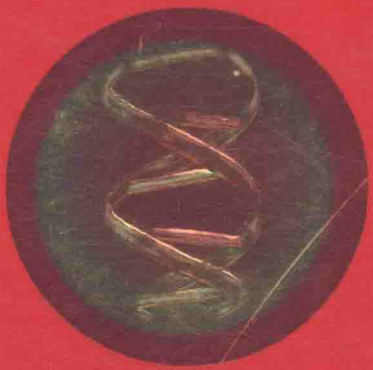

the genesis code

a novel of suspense

THE GENESIS CODE

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For Bob LaBrasca
1943–1992
Bodhisattva from Racine

God from God, Light from Light
true God from true God,
begotten not made. . . .

—Nicene Creed
Council of Chalcedon
451 c.e.

THE GENESIS CODE

PART I

JULY

1

Father Azetti was tempted.

Standing on the steps of the parish church, fingering a rosary, he gazed across the empty piazza in the direction of his favorite trattoria—and looked at his watch. It was 1:39 in the afternoon. And he was starving.

Technically, the church was to remain open from eight until two, and then again from five until eight. That's what the plaque on the door said, and Father Azetti had to admit that the plaque had a certain authority. It had been in place for nearly a hundred years. Still . . .

The trattoria was in the Via della Felice—a grandiose name for what amounted to a medieval alley, a cobbled lane that twisted away from the central square to dead-end at the stone wall that defined the town's outer limits.

One of Italy's most remote and beautiful hill towns, Montecastello di Peglia rested on a dome of rock, a thousand feet above the Umbrian plain. Its crown and glory was the Piazza di San Fortunato, where a small fountain bubbled in the cool shadow of the village's only church. Quiet and pine-scented, the little square was a favorite place for lovers and art students, who came to its ramparts for a panoramic view of the countryside. High above the quilted landscape, they gazed out at Italy's "green heart," and swooned to see the sunflower fields, trembling in the heat.

But not now, not at the moment. At the moment they were *eating*.

And Father Azetti was not. A soft breeze turned the corner and took him prisoner with the smell of baking bread. Grilled meat, and lemon. Hot olive oil.

His stomach growled, but he had to ignore it. Montecastello was, above all else, a village. There was no real hotel, only a small pensione run by a pair of expatriate Brits. Having lived in the town for less than

a decade, Father Azetti was an outsider, and would remain so into the next millennium. As such, he was suspect, and, being suspect, he was under constant surveillance, watched by the town's ever vigilant older residents, who pined for his predecessor. (Or, as they called him, "the *good* priest." Azetti? "The *new* priest.") If, during the hours of confession, Father Azetti should close the church a minute too soon, someone would certainly take notice and Montecastello would be scandalized.

With a sigh, the priest turned from the piazza and slipped back into the gloom of the church. Built in an age when glass had been a treasure, the building was condemned from conception to perpetual twilight. Apart from the dim glow of electrified candelabra, and a bank of guttering candles in the nave, the structure's only illumination came from a line of narrow windows, high on the west wall. Though few and small, the windows sometimes had a dramatic effect when, as now, they shaped the afternoon sun into shafts of light that tunneled down to the floor. Passing the mahogany tableaux that marked the stations of the cross, Father Azetti saw with a smile that the confessional waited for him in one of these pools of natural brilliance. Stepping into the light, he relished the effect, even as it blinded him. Hesitating, he imagined the scene as others might see it, and then, embarrassed by his narcissism, stepped into the confessional and pulled the curtain shut. Seating himself in the darkness, he began to wait.

The confessional was a wooden booth, a very old one, partitioned down the middle to separate the priest and the confessor. In the center of the wall between them was a screened grille that could be opened or closed by a sliding panel on the priest's side. Below the grille was a wooden shelf that ran the length of the partition. Father Azetti was in the habit of resting his fingertips on this narrow ledge as he inclined his head to hear the whispered confessions. It was clearly a habit that he shared with many priests before him: the little shelf was worn into faint scallops by centuries of pious hands fingering the wood.

Father Azetti sighed, raised the back of his hand to his eyes and squinted at the luminous dial on his wrist. It was 1:51.

On those days when he had not missed breakfast, the priest enjoyed the hours that he spent in the confessional. Like a musician playing Bach, he listened to himself, and heard his predecessors in every changing chord. The antique booth was resonant with old heartbreaks, whispered secrets, and absolution. Its walls had listened to a

million sins—or perhaps, as Father Azetti thought, to a dozen sins, committed a million times.

The priest's musing was interrupted by a familiar noise from the other side of the partition—the sound of a curtain pushed aside, followed by the grunt of an old man sinking to his knees. Father Azetti composed himself and opened the grille with a brush of his hand.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . ."

The man's face was in shadows, but the voice was familiar. It belonged to Montecastello's most distinguished resident—Dr. Ignazio Baresi. In some ways, Dr. Baresi was like himself—a worldly outsider transplanted to the stifling beauty of the provinces. Inevitably, each man was whispered over, and just as inevitably, they'd become friends. Or, if not friends, then allies, which was as much as the differences in their ages and interests would allow. The truth was, they had little in common beyond too much education. The doctor was a septuagenarian whose walls were crowded with diplomas and certificates, attesting to his achievements in science and medicine. The priest was somewhat less distinguished—a middle-age activist on the back burner of Vatican politics.

And so, they came together over a chessboard on Friday evenings, sitting in the piazza outside the Caffè Centrale, sipping Vin Santo. Their conversations were spare, and absent any intimacies. A remark about the weather, a toast to one another's health, and then: pawn to king's bishop four. Even so, after more than a year of idle remarks and occasional reminiscences, they knew one or two things about each other. It seemed enough.

Lately, however, the doctor's comings and goings had been less regular. The priest knew that the old man had been ill, but now, listening to him, he realized that Baresi had taken a turn for the worse. His voice was so weak that Father Azetti had to press his temple to the grille so he could hear.

Not that the priest was particularly curious. As with most of those who made their way to his confessional, Azetti barely needed to listen. After ten years he knew their weaknesses. At seventy-four, the doctor would have taken the Lord's name in vain, he would have been uncharitable. Before he'd taken ill, he might have lusted after a woman, might even have committed adultery—but all that was over for the poor man, who now seemed weaker by the day.

And, in fact, there was an unsavory air of anticipation in the village

about the doctor's coming end, an avid expectation from which even Father Azetti was not entirely free. After all, *il dottore* was a wealthy, pious, and unmarried man. He'd been generous to the town, and to the church, before. Indeed, Father Azetti thought, the doctor—

What?

The priest focused his attention on the doctor's faltering voice. He'd been rambling in the self-justifying way that confessors often did, avoiding the sin while emphasizing his *intentions* (which were, as always, good). He'd said something about pride, about being blinded by pride—and then, there was his illness, of course, and the realization of his own mortality. He'd seen the error of his ways. There was nothing remarkable in that, Azetti thought: the prospect of death had a way of focusing one's sensibilities, and in particular, one's moral sensibilities. Father Azetti had been thinking about this when the doctor finally got to the point and began to describe the sin itself: what he'd actually done.

The priest listened, and the word burst from him in a gasp: "*What!?*"

Dr. Baresi repeated what he'd said, speaking in a hushed and urgent voice. And then he began to elaborate, so that there could be no mistake about what was being said. Listening to the terrible and persuasive details, Father Azetti felt his heart lurch in his chest. What the man had done—what he'd *committed*—was the most spectacular sin imaginable, a sin so deep and terminal that heaven itself might never recover from it. Was it even possible?

The doctor was silent now, breathing hoarsely as he waited in the dark for absolution from his friend, his ally.

But Father Azetti was speechless. He couldn't say a word. He couldn't even think, or breathe. It was as if he'd been plunged, chest-deep, into a mountain stream. It was all he could do to gasp, and even then his mouth was like wood, and dry.

The doctor, too, was suddenly tongue-tied. He tried to speak, and then broke off in a ragged gasp. He cleared his throat with a strangled sound that was, at first, embedded deep within his chest—and then erupted with such ferocity that the booth trembled. The priest feared the man would die on the spot. Instead he heard the door crash open, and instantly the doctor was gone.

Father Azetti remained where he was, rooted to the spot like a witness to a fatal accident. Almost of its own accord, his right hand made

the sign of the cross. A second later he was on his feet. Tearing the curtain aside, he stepped from the darkness of the booth into a shaft of sunlight.

For a moment it was as if the world had disappeared. There was nothing but dust, rising to heaven in a column of buttery light. Slowly, his eyes began to adjust. They fumbled in the dazzle until, squinting, he saw the doctor's frail shape, hobbling up the aisle. The ghostly orb of his white-haired head bobbed in the gloom as he poled his way to the door with his cane, pounding the tiled floor. The priest took a step toward him, and another.

"*Dottore!* Please!" Father Azetti's voice boomed in the church, and hearing it, the old man hesitated. Slowly, he turned to the priest, and the priest saw that the look on his face had nothing to do with contrition. The doctor was on a bullet train to hell, and fear radiated from him like a halo around the moon.

And then he was gone.

2

Father Azetti wrote *Chiuso* on a piece of cardboard, so that all would understand the church was closed. Then he pinned the note to the door, locked up, and left for Rome.

The doctor's voice was like a klaxon in his head, now quiet, now louder, now dopplering off into silence. It was as if a state of emergency had been declared in his soul, and the declaration came at him over and over again, from every direction. The hushed and desperate monotone of Baresi's voice was like a low-grade infection that wouldn't go away. The words nagged at him, and all he could summon in his own heart were the empty words: *do something. Something!* And so he was. He was going to Rome. In Rome they would know what to do.

He begged a ride from the husband of the woman who cleaned his rooms, asking for a lift to the nearby (and larger) town of Todi. Once in the car, he felt better, the pressure eased by the salve of action: he had embarked, he was on the way.

The driver was a large and boisterous man given—as Father Azetti was in a position to know—to excessive card-playing and a fondness for *grappa*. He had not worked for years, and perhaps concerned for his wife's income, was excessively solicitous, constantly apologizing for the car's poor suspension, the heat, the state of the roads, and the insane behavior of other drivers. Whenever the car lurched to a stop, he thrust out a protective forearm, as if the priest were a small child who did not know enough of the fundamental laws of physics to brace himself when the brakes were applied.

Finally they arrived at the railroad station and the man jumped from his seat and dashed around to the passenger side. The door of the old Fiat, which had been battered in some ancient collision, opened with a complaining screech. The air outside the car was scarcely

cooler than inside, and a thin ribbon of sweat wandered down the priest's back. There was a parting barrage of questions from the driver as he escorted Azetti to the ticket window: Did the father want him to purchase the ticket? Should he wait at the station until the train arrived? Was the father sure that he did not want a ride to the main station in Perugia? The priest refused everything, *No-no-no-no-no-no—grazie, grazie!* Eventually, the man moved off with a courtly bow and an unmistakable expression of relief.

Father Azetti had nearly an hour to wait before the train to Perugia arrived. In Perugia he would take the shuttle to the other station, and wait another hour for the train to Rome. Meanwhile, he sat on a small bench outside the train station in Todi, baking in the heat. The air was heavy with dust and ozone, and the black robes of his order pulled the sunlight toward him.

He was a Jesuit, a member of the Society of Jesus. Despite the heat, he did not relax his shoulders or let his head droop. He sat erect. His posture was perfect.

Had he been an ordinary parish priest in a small town in the Umbrian countryside, the entire matter of Dr. Baresi's confession would probably have gone no further. Indeed, if he'd been a simpler priest, it was unlikely that he'd have *comprehended* the doctor's confession, let alone its implications. And if he had understood, he wouldn't have had the faintest idea what to do with the information or where to go with it.

But Giulio Azetti was no ordinary priest.

There was a term, popular these days in the secular world, for odd twists of fate: synchronicity. But for a religious person, synchronicity was an alien, even a demonic, concept. Father Azetti had to look at the chain of incidents as if they were hinged together by an unseen Hand, a matter of volition and not of chance. Looked at in this way, his presence in that particular confessional, listening to that specific confession, was a matter of ingenious design. He thought of the folk expression for this: *God moves in mysterious ways.*

Seated on the platform, Father Azetti meditated upon the *dimensions* of the sin confessed to him. Simply stated, it was an abomination—a crime not only against the Church, but against the cosmos. It offended the natural order, and contained within itself the end of the Church. And not only the Church.

Prayer was a shield, and he tried to pray, to use it as a screen, as