

THE BOOK OF SECRETS

CARLO J VELLA

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Australia

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THE BOOK OF SECRETS

For Tony Martin

A light so bright for you to see,

With Air and Earth to follow thee

A life, a soul, a magic spell

To heal the wound and make you well.

*And for my mother, who is always at my side,
always treasured and never forgotten.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is entirely a work of fiction, and any incidents that occur within these pages are fictitious. Street names, suburbs, and countries do exist. The story of the Knights Templar has been changed to coincide with the plot; therefore, all accounts are fictitious. Throughout the book there will be references to where research for this story was retrieved and where parts of the book relate to factual incidents; credit has been given to those concerned.

Part Two of this novel contains extracts from the *Official Graham Phillips Website* and from his book *The Templars and the Ark of the Covenant*. The rest of the story is a work of fiction, and any events, characters, and places mentioned within these pages are entirely coincidental.

The Book of Secrets is dedicated to all who have believed in me and supported me through the years.

Carlo J Vella
November 2009

PROLOGUE

He never envisioned his life taking a turn such as this, though he considered himself lucky that his upbringing was well taken care of; he attended school right through University, had a promising career in the Fire Brigade, was the product of great parents, and was surrounded by a wonderful circle of friends.

Reminiscing about the bad times, incidents that left him scarred, hatred toward events that nobody should ever be confronted with in the first place, deep sorrow accompanied with an overwhelming sense of dread and melancholy. Karl had sat down and listed on a piece of paper the good and bad times. First, the wonderful memories of days where he laughed with family and friends, the pleasure trips he took with them, experiencing the joys of travelling – these would definitely outweigh those depressing days where he just wanted to dig himself a hole and crawl into it never to come out.

He had gone through a state of depression during his teenage years: suicide, psychiatric counselling, and believing that the world had nothing to offer. Looking back at those days now, he could only shake his head in embarrassment, feeling silly for ever actually thinking he was emotionally unstable. Yes, he did look back every now and then; taking stock of the changes in his life, what he went through then, and how was is now. He was in the process of growing up, and that meant he was not mature enough to understand life.

There are concerns and problems in this world far greater than the sordid life Karl led and the misery he felt, but then it is human nature to agonize over your own existence. Perfection is something society wants – to lead a great and wonderful life and be happy. But if things go the other way, depression sets in, an abhorrence toward life, followed by a long list of questions as to why this is happening.

A lot of stories are written about our beings, dilemmas, and journeys through existence. There are countless biographies about famous people and what they went through to become what they are now, the life they had led, stories of wretchedness, horror, and death.

Alone we are not, for there are people in this world who are in a worse position. Karl had to think about this. He had a roof over his head, a job, a partner, and friends (though it was a fact of life that partners and relationships came and went) – but for the rest, these things he had, and he knew that he could overcome the dreaded feelings of alienation and sorrow that life often causes. He was equipped with a strong will, patience, and an uncanny ability of analysing the wrongs and making them right, to make it happen the way he wanted it to – the way he felt was correct. He had to take control over the situation and accept the good with the bad.

He tried this many times, like a baby learning to walk. He'd fall at first; ashamed that the first try was unsuccessful. Tears would come, and then he'd try again and fall again. He had to tell himself, *If I only persevere, it will happen*. It took a long time for him to keep gathering the strength and forcing himself to undertake the ultimate task of self-control, but eventually he succeeded.

The *Book of Secrets* is an inspiration, an adventure into life's unknown territories, a journey that captures the emotions of all one believes in. It is the story of haunting memories and an exploration through society where boundaries are taken to extremities. Like a rollercoaster, the emotions run high and then plunge to such depths that one deep breath might cause your heart to stop beating.

The *Book of Secrets* is a story about love gone wrong, a life distressed, and a world where growing into manhood is a passage of self-discovery. Closed doors can lead to nightmares, but they can also open an endless rain of opportunities. It is sometimes a game. How far can you go before hitting bottom, and how long will it be before you are back on your feet, trying again?

And again...

And again...

And this is exactly what Karl went through. Learning to cope with the decisions he made, right or wrong, and outcomes that at times not only destroyed his credibility, but his heart as well. There would be endless nights when he could not control his tears, a broken heart, which took so long to mend. But time heals all wounds, as they say, and Karl did heal.

It was a journey he would never forget.

PART ONE
MAGIC HAPPENS

THE VISITS

The story I am about to tell you can be defined as imaginary, though deep in our hearts and souls there is a mystery we all carry and somewhat believe. That mystery is life itself. Why are we here? Who put us here? There are *so* many questions we can ask; yet I do not think we can ever get any answers or truth from them.

My adventure happened to be coincidental. I was not looking for it, but sometimes these things come to you, and when they do, you unfortunately have no choice but to go along with them. At first, I felt like insanity was setting in, reality and fantasy intermingling to the point where it became difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

It opened my eyes to know that strange phenomena can occur and there are unseen beings amongst us. That is the scariest part... especially when you see these things!

I will try to explain as much as I can as to how I became who I am, and every now and then, I will tell you my personal thoughts. I want to tell you that some things may be a little strong when it comes to religious beliefs; what I mean by this is that religion can be a topic that can cause issues, and this is something I do not want to do. We all have a direction in life – a faith, a belief. We like different things. We are individuals, and that is what makes us human. My story deals with supernatural beings, the Vatican, and (of course) religious icons and faiths. I do not mean to offend anyone with my words.

I believe in what I see, and what I did see made me open my eyes to believe that such things do exist.

My name is Karl and this is my story.

* * *

“I was a bastard of a kid... well, at least I think so. Everyone else thought I was anyway.”

“Who’s everyone else?” the psychologist asked.

“My dad, my brother, and their friends. They were right. I used to do some crazy things in order to get my father worked up. I guess I never got the attention I felt I deserved. My brother got it all because he was the good son.” Karl looked past the psychologist and out at the darkened sky.

“Really, I don’t think I was such a bad child. I rebelled a little, but at that time, I truly believed that I had to. As I said, my brother got all the attention. Everybody used to say how he would grow up to have a great career and wonderful life. As for me? Well, more than likely, I would amount to nothing. Don’t you think that is just wonderful for a young kid to hear?”

“Anyway, I remember so vividly how one time Dad stripped me naked and whipped me with the belt from his pants. I still feel that buckle striking me – my legs, arms, and a couple of times on my back. I tried to hold off the tears because I didn’t want to show him I was scared and hurting. But seriously, how strong can a twelve-year-old be? It fucking hurt!”

“He left the room, locking the door behind him, and because I was on the second floor, there was no way for me to leave the house. So there I was, naked and lying on the bed, bruises popping up all over my body. I hated him for doing that. I really didn’t want to be part of that family, but it was my mother who my heart reached out to. She was a quiet woman who always wanted to keep the peace, and I don’t think I ever once heard her raise her voice.

“Anyway – and this is the strangest thing – with my face hidden in the pillow, I *felt* someone in the room. Thinking it was my brother, I told him to leave. I turned over, and that was when I first saw *him*. I cannot quite describe what he looked like. My eyes were red with all the crying, and the pain my father inflicted caused me to see a little hazily, and suddenly, I felt faint. When I woke up, I was covered in blankets, and my mother was sitting on the edge of the bed. She gave me such a beautiful smile that it warmed me all over.”

“This person you saw in your room, you can’t remember what he looked like?”

Karl thought hard, taking his mind back to the exact point when the stranger had appeared. “All I can tell you is that for a very short moment, I was drawn to him somehow. But it doesn’t end there. I warn you, it gets creepy. That night, I remember I was in the middle of falling asleep but was still awake. Opening my eyes for a second, I

thought I saw a dark figure dash across the room toward a window. Now that woke me up! I stared in the darkness, adjusting my eyes to the blackness in the room, listening for anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing – only darkness and silence. So, I closed my eyes and whatever it was grabbed my throat. I tried to scream, but its fingers were squeezing so hard I lost my voice and couldn't breathe. But there was nobody in front of me. I reached out my arms to fight off somebody or something that was not there and kicked my legs to no avail.

“Then, it was morning, and the first thing I did was run to the bathroom and take a good look at my neck. There were no finger marks or any signs of strangulation. All I could think was, *That was some nightmare!* I stepped back into the bedroom and what I saw stopped me in my tracks. There were black fingerprints on the wall above my headboard. They weren't mine, because my hands were much smaller, and there was nothing black on my skin to have caused it. It was *him*. To this day, I know it was him.”

Karl looked down at his hands and sighed. “This all sounds so weird, but that's what happened. I called my mother to have a look at it. At first, she thought I did it, but she then realized I couldn't have. Like I said, my hands were too small, and I definitely didn't have that much of a talent to draw something like that. She got a bucket with some soap and a brush and began to scrub the marks off. She scrubbed that damned wall for a week, but still the marks did not come off! A friend of hers gave us a bottle of blessed water from Lourdes, finally coming to the conclusion that a little bit of God's help may work, and it did. Mum didn't even have to scrub. All she did was put a little of the holy water on a rag and dab at the marks. The second she did, they disappeared!”

“Was that the only incident?” the psychologist asked. He was quite taken aback with the tale, though he was sure there had to be a logical explanation for such an unnatural experience. But he was not going to tell Karl this yet.

“That was the only physical occurrence I can remember at that age, but there were many others that I can recall growing up. One in particular is a dream I keep having about the Templar Knights and the Knights of Malta. I'm really fascinated with them, and to this very day, I'm still enthralled by their existence.”

“And when did this all start – this fascination?”

“Around the same time I saw that stranger.”

“Does it all mean anything to you? Do you have an explanation as to why these things have happened?”

The room was quiet as Karl thought about the question. “It’s an interest, I suppose. Just like the way some people like a certain music genre more than others do. It stays with you. As for the other thing, well, I believe in the supernatural, and I do believe that there are forces around us that we cannot see.”

The psychologist nodded as he scribbled notes on his notepad. Karl saw he was circling something repeatedly and tried to peer over the pad to see what it was, but the psychologist’s handwriting was proof that he was, indeed, a doctor of sorts. It was as illegible as your average prescription.

“What is it that you find hard to understand?” Karl asked with a smile.

“Nothing like that. Do not think that I sit here and judge you, because I don’t. My job is to try to understand you and help you deal with problems and find answers to make your life a little easier to cope with. So, what else do you want to tell me about your adolescent years?”

“Well, looking back on my primary school years, there were some strange times. Mum, my brother and I lived in Malta for a couple of years, and I celebrated my Confirmation there. When it came time for my class to receive their Confirmation, I told my teacher that I had already done mine because we did it in Malta a year earlier. Well, the stupid bitch thought I was lying to get out of it. I can still see her facial expression as she stared down at me like some sort of angry dragon waiting to incinerate me with her fiery breath. She wanted proof, and poor Mum had to locate the photo as proof for the dragon lady.

“So, there I was carrying this picture of myself dressed in white, looking up to the heavens. Kids can be so cruel, you know? I had a hard time that morning when she showed everyone the photo in class, and all day I was picked on about it. Little did the other kids realize that they would be getting a similar photo at their own Confirmations. But it didn’t matter, because by then, I had become an outcast, and I blame it all on the dragon.

“I was never involved in any sports. I ate my lunch on my own, and I spent recess in the classrooms. It sucked! My English teacher

came to my aid. He was an Indian. His name was Mr. Dinath and he had the most hypnotic blue eyes, that didn't seem to belong on the handsome Hindu. However, I could not stop staring at them, as if I was being drawn into them.

"I remember he took me to an area inside Saint Ignatius church. It was quiet, and we sat down where a statue of the holy Mary had her arms outstretched as if to greet the congregation. Behind her were two large paintings of angels descending from the sky.

"I can't recall the exact conversation we had, but I do recollect that he told me how good a person I was. He believed in me, and he reassured me that while I was at that school, he was going to make sure that everything was okay. I did not know what that all meant, but I did start seeing some changes. One in particular was Mrs. Hennshaw, the dragon. She stopped picking on me. In fact, she never acknowledged me at all after that, and I was fine with that.

"It was nearing the end of the second term, and when the third term started, there was no more Mrs. Hennshaw. Apparently, she gave her notice just before the end of the second term. I found that a little odd, but I was happy. I couldn't stand that dragon.

"Mr. Dinath was spending more time with me and to stop other teachers from talking and spreading rumours, he told them that I was a special student struggling in class and he had decided to take me under his wings. Well, here was a man who took interest in me and that was something special. For a kid, that meant a lot. I really didn't know what I was expecting, and I didn't care. I was better behaved at home and showed more respect. I was not that bastard of a kid anymore."

"Where did you two go to talk? During the time you spent with this teacher, what was happening?" Doctor Michael was quite intrigued and for a moment had stopped writing.

"I don't know whether he was quoting from the Bible or just his knowledge on life the way he saw it. He would tell me about how in the world there would be men controlled by evil influences – like Hitler, for example – how there is always a balance in life, that with light you need darkness, with good you need bad, opposite and negative and so on. Then, he talked about the angel wars in heaven and how some had fallen. He explained that this is why people say we have the devil on one shoulder to corrupt us and an angel on the other to fight off the evil and do good on Earth."

“And you believed him?”

“Of course I did! I was a kid. Teachers were supposed to know everything. I remember going home one day after one of our talks. It was a twenty-minute walk. A car slowed down beside me and cruised along at my pace. The driver rolled his window down and smiled. His nasty yellow teeth were not something to be proud of. He said, ‘Hey, kid, you ever been sucked off?’ I gave him a strange look. I had no idea what he was talking about, so I shrugged my shoulders and walked on. He followed me a little further until I turned into an alley where his car couldn’t fit, and then he was gone.

“The next day, I saw the creep again. He rolled down his window and asked me to come over. Nobody had ever warned me not to talk to strangers!” Karl joked and saw a smile forming on the psychologist’s face. “So, I stepped closer to the driver and stood there looking at this man. I did not know what the hell he was doing with one hand inside his zipper, but he asked, ‘You ever touched something like this?’ and pulled out his cock, which looked huge to me. I did not know the old pervert had an erection. All I thought was *Wow! That is so much bigger than mine!* He wanted me to touch it, and the way he was stroking the thing, it was like it was his pride and joy, like there was nothing like it in the world.

“Whether it was some invisible force pulling me away from him or what, I don’t know, but I found myself walking away, and then I started running. Nobody knew about this until I told Mr. Dinath about it the next day.

“He walked home with me in hopes of catching the pervert, but we didn’t see him that day or the day after that. It was until the following week that I saw the depraved son of a bitch, and Dinath was with me. The moment he saw the teacher at my side, he took off like lightning. I never saw that jerk again.

“I started growing fond of Dinath, and as fourth grade drew to a close, I started feeling sad because I knew I was not going to see him again. One afternoon after school when he sat with me, I felt the sadness in him as well. His words tore at me as if it was going to be the end of the world. He told me he was dying and that I must believe that the good on this Earth outweighs the bad. He urged me to continue believing that my soul is good and pure. He touched my face, and I felt a wonderful heat surge through me. His touch was of the purest form, and I clearly remember how much I cried that day.”

“Did you look up to him like a father figure?”

“No.” Karl shook his head. “He was my guardian, and that’s how I saw him.”

“And did he die?”

“Yes. I called the school every week. No one was there during the Christmas holidays, but when I called at the start of the following year, they told me that he no longer taught at the school. I persisted and continued harassing the school, demanding to know where he had gone. Finally, I get somebody on the phone who told me that he had passed away and that his funeral had come and gone.

“Knowing that I would never be seeing him again hurt. I was angry that someone I respected and cared for was taken away from me. I couldn’t help feeling like a part of me died along with him.”

MEETING OF THE MINDS

The morning was cold. The chill in the air lingered, insisting on making that incredible chore of getting out of a warm bed a difficult task. Karl didn't mind these cold days, and he preferred the winter months to summer, finding it easier to warm your body than to cool it down. His feet made their way out from under the covers and immediately felt the coldness within the room. Quickly, he moved his feet back under the warm blankets. His *can't be bothered* attitude was getting the best of him. Finally, he gathered the courage to get out of bed and dashed straight to the bathroom, showered, dressed, took one bite of a piece of toast that he had no desire to finish, locked up, and then drove to work.

At that point on this cold morning, Karl had no idea he was about to embark on one of the most eventful, frightening, and totally messed up days he had ever lived! Had he known this, he would have obeyed his cold toes and stayed in bed, ignoring the toast altogether.

It started off with Jarred, the Station Officer, who seemed to have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed. His mood was intolerable, his tone full of hatred. He was really pissed off about something. Karl made the mistake of catching his gaze as he stepped into the station, and knowing there was going to be a confrontation, quickly hurried his steps toward the stairs. But it was too late.

"This isn't some happy camp where we can waltz in anytime we like, Carmino."

Karl looked at his watch, knowing full well he was not late at all. It was still five minutes until eight. The eight o'clock news hadn't even started on the radio when he parked the car. He was just about to say something but thought against it, lest it get him in some form of trouble. "Sorry, sir," Karl said, his head bowed in faux shame. *Fine, you miserable bastard. I'll tell you what you want to hear and let you see what you want to see. To think I used to find you a decent person.*

Karl walked up the stairs, cursing the misfit for degrading him, and stormed into the locker room. “What’s up his ass?” he asked nobody in particular.

“He got to you too?” someone said.

At that moment, the alarm bells thundered, something Karl didn’t want to hear so early in the morning. They all raced for their uniforms, large folding doors mechanically opening, red lights flashing outside on pillars on each side of the station walls to warn cars and pedestrians that the vehicles were ready to swiftly exit the fire station.

The call from the Communications room downtown had instructed two vehicles to attend a road accident, and a further two from headquarters would be present. The police and ambulance were also called, as a four-car pile-up had caused serious injuries and a major traffic jam.

Not this morning. Oh, God, not today! Karl thought. He was dreading this, as it would be the first time he ever attended such a calamity. As he climbed into the back seat of one of the engines, Jarred placed a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s see what you’re made of,” he said to Karl with raised eyebrows and a tinge of dare in his voice.

Karl did not know what to make of his words, but something told him to prepare himself. Just as he clicked his seatbelt on, they pulled out and made their way north of Hoddle Street close to the eastern freeway. The traffic was at a standstill, both outbound and inbound, though it was lucky that the council had made the left lane a bus route only between seven and nine every morning.

Karl could see from a distance the disaster that was causing major commotion, and the closer they got to the scene, the worse it appeared. The police were already directing traffic to one lane city-bound, but the entrance to the eastern freeway was inaccessible. The overturned car was a mess, and it appeared that the driver must have been speeding and missed the exit lane to the freeway. He or she had misjudged the traffic island that separated the two lanes heading north and the three lanes to the freeway, and then lost control, trying to veer left onto the freeway lanes, striking the traffic island and overturning the car.

Within minutes, they arrived, and they were right in the middle of the commotion and the traffic jam – it was all happening. Karl

jumped out of the brigade vehicle and carefully trekked over to the car that was damaged the worse. Inside the car, he could tell the mother was dead. He had seen enough car accidents and victims to sense if someone was alive or not. The metal was pushed up against her, crushing her limbs and her chest, and there was blood spilling from a deep head wound. Her life as a mother had ended.

But he was sure the boy was still alive. He must have been seven, maybe eight years old. *She took the whole impact to save her child.* “Somebody help me get this kid out!” Karl yelled, trying to open the jammed passenger door. From his belt, he withdrew a metal fire hydrant key and scraped off the shards of windshield glass. He climbed over the hood, pulling the mother as far as he could away from her son, but he couldn’t keep her steady in one position, and she kept falling back. He needed another pair of hands to hold her in place.

“Pete, you want to help me here?”

Within seconds, Pete was holding the mother in position while Karl stretched to reach for the boy’s seatbelt. He unlatched it and carefully lifted the boy toward him. Pete let go of the woman, and the corpse fell grotesquely into the passenger seat, her face so splattered with blood that it was barely recognizable. He assisted Karl with the child, and the two of them gingerly pulled him through the windshield making sure not to cut him on the broken glass. The paramedics had arrived, and they lent a hand pulling the boy out of the car.

“Apparently, the driver who caused all this has only a few minor injuries.”

Karl looked at Pete, shaking his head in disgust. “Isn’t it always like that? The main offender survives while innocent people have to die. It sucks. That poor kid lost his mum, and this guy walks away with scratches.”

“Maybe they are left to drown in their guilt. It will haunt the guy for the rest of his life, you know.”

“For some reason, it’s still not right.”

They both stepped toward the ambulance. Karl wanted confirmation that the child was okay. He received his answer from one of the paramedics who checked the boy’s pulse. “He’ll be fine, but we need to take him to the children’s hospital for further checkups.”

Karl turned to where the child's mother sat motionless, and to his amazement, he saw a man on top of the car. "What the hell is that guy doing on top of the car?"

His colleague and the paramedic both looked in that direction but saw nobody. "I can't see anyone, Karl. You okay?" Pete asked, casting him a quizzical look.

Karl nodded, his eyes focused on this strange person who seemed to have caught his gaze. *She was not dead, Karl. You could have saved her as well*, the person said.

"Did you hear that?"

The two looked at him, still puzzled.

In the blink of an eye, the apparition was gone. Karl found himself near the car again, staring helplessly at the dead woman. "I'm sorry," he said, though he still wasn't sure why he was so compelled to apologize to a woman who could no longer hear him.

Across the road, policemen were questioning the man who had caused the accident, the stranger he had seen a moment ago now standing beside one of the policeman. In spite of his good-looking, well-dressed appearance and eyes the brightest of blue, there was something sinister about the man. Karl was stunned that he could so clearly see the colour of the stranger's eyes, but he did. And they were beckoning him closer.

"Hey, Carmino," his officer called out, "this isn't a holiday camp. Get your ass back here."

Again, the apparition was no longer there. "Shit!" Karl said under his breath. He took a final look at the police and, satisfied that he must have imagined the whole thing, turned and approached the Station Officer he so despised.

* * *

In all reality, the Hoddle Street catastrophe that morning was not all that horrific. Any fatal accident is heart wrenching, but there had been worse. The commotion on the street was what made it look so ghastly, as the traffic was usually all too busy for so many pedestrians to be about. Between the onlookers, the accident victims, the policemen, fire fighters, and paramedics scrambling about, and blaring sirens and flashing lights, it made for an explosive scene.

As if the accident was not enough to deal with that morning, Karl was not in any mood to listen to the absurdity that his boss was dishing out. And all because he took charge to rescue the boy without consent.

“You listen to me, Carmino. When you get these pips on your shoulder, then you can do as you please, but while I’m in command, you don’t go trying to be a hero. You hear me? And another thing; what’s this I hear about you seeing things? That’s not a good sign, Carmino. What the hell is wrong with you anyway? I don’t know what’s going on with you, but—”

Karl only stared at him, his thoughts on the stranger rather than the harsh words his superior was spitting out. It was bizarre how he could see this person and nobody else could. *Maybe I need a holiday*, he thought.

“—you listening to me, Carmino?”

“Yes, sir,” Karl answered quickly, shaking himself from the daydream. He stared at the coming onslaught, the eyes full of anger and hatred, but he couldn’t help but notice the chiselled features that made this monster look incredibly handsome; especially with a five o’clock shadow on his face. *You’re such a tart!* he thought and couldn’t help but smile.

“You have an attitude, Carmino, and that is something I will not tolerate.”

Karl sensed the others listening in on the rant and pictured them with their ears on the door hushing each other in order not to miss a single word. He couldn’t help but break into a fit of laughter at the thought of it.

“You’re a soiled faggot, Carmino,” the Officer said, his nose only inches away from Karl’s.

Karl’s laughter subsided. He didn’t appreciate name-calling, especially when it came to his sexuality. “What right do you have to call me a soiled faggot?” A finger was pointed into his stomach, Karl unaware that his anger was rising. “I’m the one who’s fed up with *your* attitude. If you don’t like me just because I’m a faggot, so be it, but I can tell you that I’m probably more of a respected man than you are, you piece of shit!”

“You’re out of line, Carmino!”

Good old Harry’s voice faltered, believe it or not, and the dismal son of a bitch was slowly backing away. Karl knew this was his

chance to spell it all out, whatever the consequences were. It was too late to stop.

“No more, Harry. Whatever your problem is, take it somewhere else. You have been at me from the first day I came here to put up with your abuse and ridicule. You can go fuck yourself; we spoiled faggots can fight our own battles, and if I have to fight a round with you, I won’t hesitate.”

He let it go at that, turned away from Harry, and calmly walked out of the office.

Although he had stood up for himself with Harry, Karl couldn’t help feeling a deep depression set in. There were painful memories, old wounds opening, and that lonely feeling from society still shunning the existence of homosexuality. The day’s events helped, and the confrontation with his boss was something he couldn’t believe he did. It was just not like him at all.

I need a drink, he thought. He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door. *Maybe I’ll get lucky*.

He walked in feeling slightly uncomfortable and right away sensed the eyes watching him. He could *feel* them. It had been a while since he had stepped foot in this particular establishment, and for the regulars, he was new blood. He could not bear to look at his new admirer. *What am I doing here?* he questioned himself. He was not like any of these lonely people, some desperate and others who preyed on the weak; quarries to be had for one night only. It was an uncomfortable sensation, and he felt like raw meat surrounded by lions.

Some might have been flattered by such fanfare and attention, but the idea appalled Karl. He was not like this. This was not the way it should be. This shouldn’t be happening! The knot in the pit of his stomach churned, and nausea suddenly enveloped him. His mind told him to run, but something kept him concreted to the floor, his legs immobilized. He was getting scared, and beads of sweat began to form on his forehead.

Samael read Karl’s discomfort clearly, and this pleased him. How he enjoyed watching inexperienced people who didn’t know how to conduct themselves in such places. He smiled a determined, confident grin. His posture demonstrated a sense of control; evidence

of his years of experience, and his stance was either inviting or inapproachable, depending on the prey.

Self-assurance radiated from every pore in his body. His mind knew exactly what it wanted, where to get it, and what to do with it. Samael knew why he was here and without fail, he succeeded in getting what he wanted. He saw how the others looked at him. They were more afraid than anything else – afraid of rejection. But the others did not matter. He wanted Karl.

Samael casually but somewhat arrogantly placed a hand on Karl's shoulder, alarming him. The panic in Karl's eyes made Samael's heart beat with excitement. "You're not a regular here, are you?" he said with a cunning smile.

Karl gazed into the stranger's eyes intensely. There was something wrong with this scene. He felt it, as if there were danger emanating from the hand resting on his shoulders. "Excuse me, but I was about to leave," Karl managed to say.

"You are free to go, but I can see your curiosity is keeping you here."

"I'm sorry?" Karl questioned, still staring at the hypnotic dark blue eyes.

"You know what they say... curiosity kills."

"You mean, curiosity killed the cat; I'm not a cat."

"Means the same thing." Samael raised his eyebrows.

"To be honest, I don't know why I'm here," Karl confessed.

"I do. I can read it all over you – in your expression, your stance, and your eyes. Look around you." Samael gestured around the room with a hand. "Look how pathetic these people are. You're just like them – lost and lonely. They don't want to confront their emotions, so they come here hoping to forget their worries. You're one of them, my friend."

Puzzled, Karl finally looked away and gazed around the room. The stranger was right. There was a lot of sadness here. "I don't belong here, and you are totally wrong about me."

"Am I really?"

"Who are you?"

Karl and Samael studied each other. Karl looked quite apprehensive, and the way Samael stared back with such serenity frightened him.

“I may be somebody you would want to know or someone you would soon want to forget.”

Karl had had enough. Mind games were one thing he could not tolerate. “You’re crazy!” He turned to leave, stopped frozen in his track at the sudden mention of his name.

“Karl, look deep within and ask yourself what you want. I can heal your heart, but I can also take your soul.”

For an instant, Karl’s heart stopped. The stranger was no longer there – not even a trace of him.

Samael had vanished.

* * *

“So I went home feeling lonelier and more depressed than I originally was. I was also frightened, though I don’t know by what. The words he said to me became repetitive. *‘I can heal your heart but I can also take your soul.’* Maybe the guy was insane. You do get that type in bars. They come out with some crazy shit!”

“Let’s go back a little to your boss.” Karl saw the psychologist looking up at him and felt his mind was running a marathon. “You have told me how verbally abusive he is toward you and your colleagues. What happened after that last confrontation?”

“His outbursts became less frequent, and I think I started to feel sorry for him. It’s like he’s become lost, as if I somehow depleted his anger and turned him to mush. I didn’t realize I was going to make such an impact. I was annoyed and stood up for myself. I felt good about it as well. No one deserves to be talked to like that. We aren’t savages!”

Karl suddenly realized that he was digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands. In fact, it was the psychiatrist’s eyes that guided him to the realization that he was trying to draw blood from his own hands. He withdrew his right hand, slightly self-conscious with every move he made.

“I don’t like being treated like that,” he said softly. “It seems that everywhere I go, it’s like that. People want to impose their authority over everyone else.”

“Maybe he’s just doing his job as a senior officer.”

Karl looked at him coldly. “You’re not there to see what he’s like.”

He didn't want to stay there anymore and wanted the conversation to cease. He felt the whole world had become cruel, even this psychiatrist sitting opposite him, staring at him as if he was trying to read every thought possible in his mind, searching to find what was making him tick, or maybe what was going to make him explode. *Does he actually think I'm making all this up and that everything that has happened is my fault? Oh, God, am I causing myself this entire trauma for no apparent reason?*

Karl found himself standing up, apologizing for making a quick exit. He did not even give the doctor time to arrange another appointment. Reaching for the knob, all he heard before hurrying out was, "When shall we make another—"

AN EASTER LUNCH

Easter was never the same after Karl's mother passed away, and Christmas was a holiday which really meant nothing to him. It became only an excuse for celebrations, but this didn't mean he was a nonbeliever when it came to religion. Karl was brought up Catholic. He believed in Jesus, but his path was Wicca – though much like his sexual orientation, he never told his family about it.

Being married and divorced and having a child had enabled him to hide his secret. It was not that he lied to people; it just seemed that his family and friends never suspected that a gay guy could be intimate with a woman, let alone have children with her. They were married for six years. As far as his family knew, he had to be straight, and Karl left it at that. Now that his mother was deceased, he could never tell his father the truth. The man was happily going about his life, keeping himself occupied, and at seventy, the last thing he wanted to hear was that his son was gay. Karl had no idea how his father would take the news, and he was not about to find out. Life was good for his father after he finally accepted the fact that his wife had passed away. Three years of learning to live without her, sleeping alone, and getting used to dining alone couldn't have been easy after twenty-seven years of marriage. Karl saw no reason to complicate the old man's life further.

It was Easter Sunday, with a traditional ham dish in front of them. Karl's son Mat was first to finish his meal and headed straight to the living room to watch his *Terminator* DVD.

"You don't get to come around as often," Karl's father said.

Karl looked at him, staring at the aged features. Sadness swept over him with the sudden reality that his father might not have many years left. Great despair washed over him at the thought. He could not find the right words to answer him, but his father was right. There had been so many times where he could have taken the

twenty-minute journey to visit him but always came up with an excuse. “I know, Dad, but you know me,” is all he could say.

His brother Pat sat opposite him, more of a daddy’s boy than Karl had ever been. Pat kept to himself most of the time, but his impatience with their father was not something Karl appreciated. Tolerance was not part of his lifestyle, and he regularly answered their father in such a tone that any person would feel like they wanted to crawl under a rock and never come out. His tongue could be poisonous, spitting out ridiculous, shameful utterances, but not once had their father ever told him to bite his tongue.

“Yes, we don’t see much of you anymore,” Pat agreed. “You haven’t even come to see my new house!”

“Neither have you, brother.” A victorious smile shone on Kyle’s face, and the knowledge that he had once again stopped his brother in his tracks warmed him. He could see that Pat was suddenly irritated. Very purposely removing his smile, Karl looked at him sincerely and asked, “What is it about you that makes you so bitter, Pat?” *Victory is mine!* thought Karl.

Mr. Carmino by now had finished his meal and left his two sons to discuss their indifferences. He strolled to the living room to join his grandson. The dining area was situated at the other end of the house, leaving the brothers free to talk without their father overhearing.

“I’m not bitter,” Pat began, wiping his lips with a napkin. He pushed his chair back a little to stretch his legs underneath the table. “Since Mum passed away, you don’t seem to be interested in the family anymore, that’s all.”

“No, that’s not it.” Karl’s emotions took a turn for the worst. The idea of bringing his mother into this conversation was unheard of. “Don’t bring her into this. You know we could never sit down and have a stable conversation between us, and whenever it doesn’t go your way, you put the blame on me. What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked sternly.

Pat didn’t answer right away. His eyes darted over at Karl’s expression and then wandered to the tablecloth to study the Maltese insignia at its centre. Slowly, a smile formed. Still gazing at the tablecloth, he said, “You have always been the smarter one. You’re free spirited; always knew what you wanted. You were married, and you have a son. You’re educated.”

“I hope you’re not jealous. What about being happy, Pat? Yes, I have a son, and out of everything that you mentioned, Mat is the only thing that is important. But ask me if I’m happy.”

“Are you?” This time, he stared at Karl.

“Not really. You have no idea what I have gone through in the past twenty years and what I am going through now. I could tell you, but I choose not to because it is something that I prefer not to discuss. What you have been seeing is a façade because I try not to let it destroy me.”

Pat raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders in an uncaring fashion. “Your choice, little brother.”

“I’ll never understand you, Pat. Being my older brother, you never gave me a chance. You never once gave me an opportunity to look up to you as a brother. You always pushed me away.”

“I was there for you during your divorce, remember? I helped you out then, didn’t I?”

“Yes, with money, you did. But that was different. We were adults by then. When I was growing up, you were never there for me.”

“You’re doing okay. You didn’t need me.”

Karl shook his head in disappointment and sighed. “Okay, I’ll tell you something I don’t want you to ever tell anyone else. And don’t ask me any questions about it.” He took a deep breath and looked around him to ensure Mat and his father were nowhere around. “I was molested when I was twelve, and it went on for a few years. Who, I will not say. I had to live with it, and it hasn’t been easy. And to shock you even more, I’m gay. So there you have it.”

Pat looked on in awe, and it was hard for Karl to see which of the two disclosures bewildered his brother the most. He only stared, possibly letting the news sink in before he was able to speak. But it took a long time coming, and Karl didn’t like this silence. “Say something.”

“I really don’t know what to say. Funny, but the fact that you’ve admitted you’re gay isn’t what surprised me.”

“You’re okay with that?” Karl was surprised.

“Don’t look at me as if I’m some sort of ogre. I may have been an arrogant pig toward you, but I am an understanding person, and you are still my little brother, gay or not. I just can’t understand why you

never brought up this business about being molested. Why didn't you tell someone?"

"There were reasons why I couldn't, and I still can't to this very day."

"Why?"

"Because it was years ago. It is history. I've learned to live with it."

"You said you aren't happy, Karl. So, have you really learned to live with it? Really?"

When Karl really thought about this, he had to admit that he was happy. He had really only insinuated otherwise to gain his brother's sympathy, something he had never received from Pat. Also, he did care about Pat to some degree, and he didn't want to act as if his life was so much better. "No, I told you to ask me if I'm happy. I am happy, and the guy I'm seeing is wonderful."

"Oh." Pat didn't know what to make of this, but he did accept the fact that Karl was gay and looking at him now, there was definitely nothing different about him. The only variation was that he liked men, which brought a question to his mind. "One thing I would like to know," he began, hesitating, "Uh... which one of you is the guy?"

* * *

Karl still couldn't quite accept how his brother had received the news of his sexuality quite calmly, for that alone was more than enough to make him believe that Pat was not only considerate, but caring as well. He had thoroughly enjoyed the Easter lunch, and the afternoon had gone really well. There had been more conversations with his brother than all their years put together, and he began to feel a warm sense of belonging and closeness to Pat. It was a shame it took thirty-seven years, but better late than never.

Matthew was extremely happy to receive his chocolate eggs, and though the Carmino family never bought anything for each other when it came to Easter and Christmas, Karl couldn't go without at least buying something small for his father.

As for Matthew, being the only child in the Carmino clan allowed him to be quite spoiled. Karl confessed that he spoiled his fifteen-year-old, but this couldn't be helped. He was a gay father with a teenage son who was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Not only did Mathew receive chocolate eggs, but a total of \$150 between the three of them.

Karl's father wore a wide grin, delighted to see his grandson eagerly stuffing the bills into his pocket. "You should give some of that to your father."

"You're so funny, Grandad."

Karl smiled and left Pat and Mat in the room while taking hold of his dad's arm and escorting him outside into the backyard. "You okay, Dad?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" He lit a cigarette and offered one to Karl.

"I don't know. Maybe you should go away, a holiday. Go to Malta. You haven't been away since Mum died."

"I see you twice, maybe three times a year, and you're telling me what to do with my life?" He was joking, of course, and playfully punched Karl lightly in the stomach. "In fact, I have been contemplating going away for six months this year. Maybe that's a bit too long?" He thought about this, looking up to the sky. "Yes, three months will be better. You know your aunts, how they talk and gossip. Troublemakers they are!"

"Tell me about it! Last time I went, they were fighting over who gets what when Grandma dies. I gave her a gold brooch, and they were arguing who takes it. I told them she was to be buried with it. I wonder who actually has it now."

"I want this house to be split between you and your brother when I die."

Karl smiled. "We'll deal with it when the time comes, Dad."

"I've had two heart attacks, Karl. I'm still smoking, and lately, all I want to do is sleep."

"That's why you need to get away from here. Mum's death has put a lot of strain on you."

"I'm very tired, son. I miss your mother, and there isn't much left for me to do."

The conversation took a sad turn, and Karl desperately wanted to change the subject. This was not something he wanted to hear at Easter. Things were going very well, and he was enjoying the afternoon after many years of constant arguments with his brother on every visit.

"You're being silly, Dad. What about watching your grandson grow?"

Mr. Carmino shook his head despondently. “When you get to my age, you’ll understand. Now, enough of this talk. I shouldn’t have brought it up on a holy day, and you need to take Matthew back to his mother.”

Karl didn’t have to take Matthew back for another hour, but he could see in his father’s eyes how tired the old man was, and it was an excuse for them to leave so he could retire for the evening. Karl nodded and guided his father back into the house.

Before leaving, Pat shook Karl’s hand, a gesture that took him by surprise, and though no words were uttered, Karl understood. He reached out to his brother, and Pat responded.

In the car, Karl’s emotions stirred. He glanced at his son, and without thinking, asked him, “If I was to tell you that I’m gay, what would your thoughts be?”

Matthew looked at him, dumbfounded. “That’s a strange question. Why ask?”

“Pat and I were talking about a friend of his who has two kids, and he’s gay,” he lied. “One of the kids accepts him, but the older one finds it hard to adjust.”

“I don’t know, really. I guess you would still be my dad. As long as you are not one of those men who likes dressing up in girl’s clothes and acting silly. But I wouldn’t dare tell any of my friends. They think gay people are weird.”

“You’ve met some of my friends. Do you think they’re weird?”

“No, but one of them talks like he has a problem. I mean, for a man, his voice doesn’t suit him. Don’t they call them drag queens or something like that?”

Karl laughed. “Yes, that’s him alright!”

“Mum doesn’t believe that they should show themselves to the world. It is a disgrace for them to be so open in front of children.”

“There’s a lot your mum has to learn about life. Thanks for your honesty.”

A warm feeling flooded through Karl as he drove to drop Matthew off at his mother’s. It was a perfect afternoon and the last he would have with his family.

KARL AND MICHAEL

It had been some time since Karl had made the effort to see his psychiatrist and really, he wondered if it had done any good anyway. Was it helping him at all? He didn't think so, but it was definitely helping the doctor at \$120 per visit – not bad considering that was for a forty-five-minute session.

“I know this is going to be a silly question to ask, but what is this really going to accomplish?”

The doctor looked at him with a smile. “Since you've been coming here, there has been some negativity that seems to be troubling you. You don't like talking about your experiences, your problems. Karl, there are aspects of your life that you keep hidden, and they are upsetting you. Your emotions are everywhere.”

“I'm getting by.”

“And that is good, but I don't believe it. Your work is stressful, and that can destroy you mentally and physically. I do want to hear about this Michael fellow. I'm quite interested.”

Karl had already told him certain strange incidents that had happened in his life, and this was not going to be any different. He would either scribble *CRAZY* on his notepad, or just sit there and enjoy earning his money.

“I believe there is somebody for everyone somewhere in this world. This person could be living next door or on the other side of the world. However, I believe that the person is out there. My mother used to tell me to always believe in something, no matter what it is, and one day, it will happen. Being a Pagan, I decided to get a little help. Wanting so much to find someone, I created a spell under the brightest full moon.”

This was where Karl paused and looked at the psychiatrist, wanting to see if there was some sort of reaction. Today's society was not ready to believe in magic and witchcraft. It was still classified as taboo by the Catholics and total rubbish by others, but

the doctor's face remained expressionless, and Karl found this somewhat disappointing.

"I can't tell you exactly how the spell went, but basically, I told the Earth that for my happiness, I wanted to meet my so-called perfect match. Yes, I know..." Karl smiled stupidly and nodded, "... there isn't such a thing as a *perfect match*, but it can happen. I believed it could happen. I described exactly the way I wanted him to look – and it harm none so mote it be"

"And that means?" the psychiatrist asked, looking engrossed.

"We never create spells to harm anybody. We are not evil, and neither do we dabble in the black arts to cause harm. It is part of the Wiccan rede, 'Harm none and do what thou will.' We send energy out with the help of the four elements, and our bodies being the fifth. Spells are like prayers.

"Anyway, when the spell was complete, all I needed to do was wait and believe, but never waiting in hope because it might not happen. You continue to live your life as normal. I never looked for this person intentionally – you just don't do that. You will know when it happens, and fortunately enough, I didn't have to wait long. When the universe is ready to grant you that wish, it will."

"And you believe in that?"

"I believe that things happen for a reason, and I also believe that what you send out comes back to you three times stronger. It was at a café on Brunswick Street. He was sitting at the next table with another person whose back was to me. I caught his eyes inadvertently, and the more I looked the more I found him familiar. His eyes smiled at me, and though it was in the evening, I could see the deepest blue colour in them. He had an angelic face that you just could not ignore. His features were perfect – the lined cheekbones, the nose, the lips, the olive European complexion, and the perfectly trimmed goatee. I was completely taken by him, and then it dawned on me that what I was staring at was the answer to my spell!

"Yes." Karl nodded, for he knew how foolish this all sounded, especially to someone whom he was sure did not believe in The Craft. If only he could read his mind, only to find out whether he thought him insane or not!

"Yes," Karl repeated, "the description of him was exact, right down to the smile he shared with me, for I, too, was smiling back. The only difference was the eyes. I had asked for brown, but his

were blue. It was then that my smile disappeared and a sudden panic took hold of me. A flaw in the spell means something is not right, and I began dreading that something would happen. I tried to look away, to avoid him, but he kept on staring, and his friend, without turning, was on his feet and walked away. I never got to see the friend's face.

"Nevertheless, I was drawn to him, and I wanted him. There was a yearning within me that I just could not control. All this time, my friend kept asking me 'What's the matter?'" and I never heard him, as if he wasn't even there. I finally shook myself into the real world and smiled weakly, telling him all was okay, though I could tell he knew I was lying. When I looked back over at the other table, the man had left, and I could see him in the distance walking away. Follow him, I said to myself, but he was a stranger. Or was he really one of my creations? Then, I thought it was all a strange coincidence and left it at that.

"But that night, my thoughts were of him. I could not sleep. Even the days were filled with his image. I returned to the café night after night, and each night I would go home feeling empty, lost, and filled with a sense of loneliness. However, I didn't give up. On the fifth night, I saw him again, alone this time. And this was where it freaked me out..."

* * *

Karl didn't even see Michael approach. He appeared, standing next to him with that same alluring smile he wore five nights ago. He moved to sit down opposite Karl, his eyes seeming somehow brighter, more glazed than Karl remembered.

"Yes, sit, please," Karl politely invited. His heart started pounding, along with an uncontrollable desire stirring inside him. *How can one man cause all these emotions?*

The smile didn't appear to change, as if it had been permanently painted on. Even when he spoke, it remained there as if it had a purpose, and maybe it did. The introductions were in formal fashion. Each shook the other's hand and acknowledged one another with a slight nod of acceptance. The only difference with the handshake was that Michael's index finger was extended to rest on Karl's pulse.

Sudden images flashed into Karl's mind: men on horseback fleeing, their white tunics torn and bloodied, the red cross that bore their rights and claimed them as a unit, an insignia that was slowly dying away. These men were being hunted and savagely killed. Then, another image appeared vaguely, but before he could see what it was, he quickly pulled his hand away, feeling the immense heat that radiated from it.

"Who are you?" Karl asked, though he had no idea why. The answer lay in that painted smile. The hair on the back of his neck rose, and a slight chill definitely drifted through him.

"It is true when they say be careful what you wish for. Magic does happen," Michael said, his voice deep and a little husky. "Hey, I'm just a normal guy like you. The only difference is, I may know you more than you think."

"How much do you know?"

"I know you like to study ancient artefacts and you find history fascinating. For you, it opens doors to other worlds because there are so many secrets and so much to learn. You are also Pagan, albeit you do have skills, which you have unfortunately not mastered yet – and I do not think you want to either. They have surfaced, but you're unaware of them. I also know that you are enthralled with the history of the Knights of Templar and, of course, the Knights of Saint John."

"Good guess," Karl smiled.

Michael raised his eyebrows in question. "Only good? I think it's extremely excellent in the very least. Aren't you curious as to how I know?"

"I don't really want to know how much you know about me. I *am* intrigued in how you heard my call though."

"I don't think that matters. I'm here now. But in all honesty, I couldn't answer you anyway. All I know is that I saw you at the table the other evening, and I liked what I saw. I knew you would come back and saw you here every night."

"You saw me here and you never approached until now?" Karl hid his face, feeling embarrassed. "Shit!"

Michael laughed. "I'm glad you kept coming back. From a distance, I looked at you, and it reminded me of a little boy whose dad promised him to pick him up. When he never shows, the boy slowly gets up, feeling miserable and slightly heartbroken, and slowly walks away. Night after night, he comes here hoping that his

father will come, and night after night, there is that same despair and that lonely journey home.”

“Do I look that desperate and pathetic to you?”

“No,” Michael immediately replied. “But there is innocence in you that captures your youth. I find that appealing. In fact, I never had much of a childhood. I grew up with adults. My parents died when I was young. I travelled a lot as well, but experiencing the joys of being a child and playing with other children is something I would not know.”

“I don’t understand why parents would strip their child from being one. Why do that to you?”

“It is a long story, and maybe one day I will tell you, but it was not my parents’ fault. They loved me dearly and did anything for me. However, we cannot ponder over things that cannot be changed. There is a vast world out there that needs to be explored, and who knows? You may even stumble across something that may suddenly exist beyond your wildest imagination.”

“No.” Karl shook his head. “That is left to archaeologists or people with money who can fund these adventures and go on digs. If I did have the money, I would be spending the rest of my days looking for clues to certain treasures.”

“So tell me, what have you learned studying the Knights Templar?”

“There is really nothing new. I guess it is the same information everybody else knows.”

“But if you dig deeper, you will find out something that no person could ever know.”

“Now you’re being stupid, I’m sorry to say. There are professional people examining every inch of this world for clues – da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* is still being carefully analysed.”

“Yes,” Michael interjected, “and they are still finding clues.”

“But didn’t the Templars falsify clues purposely to ensure nobody found their treasures? It has been documented that they did this in order to lead people on wild goose chases.”

“Yes, that is true, but in time, man will find the answers. Think about it. The Ark of the Covenant, the shroud, and even Egyptian tombs are being unearthed to this day after centuries of hiding.”

“Well, I will not be one of those people to discover an ancient artefact. It would be wonderful, but let the professionals do it. You still never told me your name.”

“Michael.”

“And your story?”

“A complicated one to understand, but to simplify the conversation, I am Italian, though really I lived in many countries and studied many cultures, so I don’t hail from one specific place.”

Karl stared, listening and wondering what this person was all about. *Strange* was all that came to mind.

“My father was a Druid, and I travelled to a number of countries and studied with monks and other religious leaders within The Craft. I was ordained to be the next high priest, but I did not let that happen.”

“Druids in this century? Are you serious?”

“Oh, yes! That’s like asking if witches exist. They do, of course, but not the fairytale types society imagines. We all know that the witch trials were conducted by religious fanatics who believed the devil walked among them recruiting helplessly foolish and weak woman. These people were lovers of the Earth, used what Mother Nature grew for them to aid in everyday life – quiet folk who minded their own business, kept to themselves. What caused the problem was that they did not believe in any type of religion. However, the Church and its leaders did not like this. Were they losing their flock? Maybe yes, and they could not have nonbelievers within their social order. I am sure you know the rest.

“Like witches, Druids were shunned and were known as non-Christians, and therefore, setting foot on holy Christian land was forbidden. Anyone who was not Christian could very well get themselves in some trouble. People in high authority, like the Templars, got their way if they felt the least bit threatened.”

Michael paused, staring into Karl’s eyes, carefully watching for any change of expression. There was interest but also confusion, and to Michael, this was expected.

“They were founded in the Holy Land in 1119 by two French knights, who swore to devote themselves to the protection of Christian pilgrims visiting Jerusalem and the holy places. Crusaders had captured Jerusalem in 1099 and then struggled to establish an effective military and political structure to protect their conquests.

The contribution of these founding knights was tiny, but they quickly captured the imagination of the Western Christian world. Soon, they were given a base in the al-Aqsa Mosque, which Christians believed had been the site of the Temple of Solomon. They received papal recognition at the council of Troyes in Champagne in 1129, where they were described as a military order, a quite unique institution at the time, for they not only swore the usual monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also made a fourth, key promise — to defend the holy places from the infidel.

“From there, they grew rapidly into an international order, receiving lands in the West that they developed into a great network of preceptories. This enabled them to supply men and money for the cause of the Holy Land, as well as to offer a range of services to crusaders, most importantly with finances, a role that they expanded into something like a modern banking service.

“Such an order might seem invulnerable, but by the early fourteenth century, the Knights Templar faced a serious crisis. In 1291, the Christians had been driven out of Palestine by the Mamluks of Egypt and were thus obliged to wage the holy war from their remaining base in Cyprus. This expulsion was particularly serious for the Templars, whose prestige and functions were so closely identified with the defence of the sites associated with Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. They were desperate to see papal plans for a new crusade take concrete form. In 1307, in response to a request from Pope Clement V, James of Molay, the grand master, they therefore travelled to the West to advise the papacy and gather support in the courts of Christendom.

“Thus, on October 12, 1307, James of Molay was present in Paris, holding one of the cords of the pall at the funeral of Catherine, wife of Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip IV ‘the Fair’ of France. However, the master had no idea what awaited him. Without warning, royal officials, acting on secret orders from Philip, fell upon the Templars living in France in a coordinated operation that took hundreds into custody. The order for the arrests said that the Templars were not a force dedicated to the defence of the Holy Land, willing to endure martyrdom for their beliefs, they were, in fact, apostates who denied Christ, spat on crucifixes, engaged in indecent kissing and compulsory sodomy, and worshipped idols.

“Although rulers outside France initially found the allegations difficult to believe and the pope was outraged because he had not been consulted, at first sight the charges seemed justified. Most of the Templars confessed to one or more of the allegations, including Molay himself, who repeated his admissions in public in the presence of a select gathering of university theologians. In the end, neither the papal attempt to take over the trial nor a robust defence of the order led by two Templar lawyer-priests could shake the impact of these first confessions. In March of 1312, at the Council of Vienne, the pope felt obliged to suppress the order after nearly two centuries of service to the Christian faith. Two years later, on March 14, 1314, Molay and Geoffrey of Charney, preceptor of Normandy, were burnt to death as relapsed heretics on an island in the Seine in the centre of Paris

“The trial caused a sensation and remains a subject of fascination and speculation seven centuries later. The circumstances are intriguing, not the least because they evoke such striking modern parallels; Stalinist show trials and McCarthyite inquisitions have their medieval precursors. Philip ‘the Fair’ himself was certainly motivated to suppress the order by an interest in their property, for he presided over a regime in constant financial crisis. Yet as a fanatically pious and often credulous king, he may have genuinely believed that his realm was threatened by a secret anti-Christian conspiracy, which it was his duty to crush.

“Few historians today doubt that the charges were concocted and the confessions obtained by torture, but Templar innocents have been given no protection against modern sensationalism, for the raw material offered by the order’s spectacular demise is too tempting to ignore. Among the first to exploit were the eighteenth-century Freemasons. The Freemasons adopted the legend of the murder of Hiram, King of Tyre, who was employed to build Solomon’s Temple and was murdered because he would not reveal Masonic secrets. According to the Freemasons’ version of history, the Templars were abolished because, as occupants of Solomon’s Temple, they held key knowledge that could potentially discredit both Church and state.

“As myth has it, on that March evening in 1314, unique knowledge *was* supposedly handed down to the care of future generations.”¹

Karl’s hand moved to his chin and questioned Michael suspiciously. “You seem to know a lot about the Templars. Are you a historian or something?”

Michael avoided the question and raised his right hand to quiet him. “You will find out that there is a puzzle that is yet to be completed. Throughout time, there have been people who have gotten close but never succeeded.”

“And your point?”

“You, Karl, are the one who may solve that puzzle.”

Karl shook his head in disbelief.

“No, you are crazy.”

He stood up to leave when Michael suddenly gripped him by the wrist.

*“Roses are red, they carry the power,
They carry the love, and so it be.
A stranger from afar, he will come to me.
Eyes mysterious though they are brown,
Features of an angel, a halo for a crown.
Sweet as can be, loving arms,
A mind full of history and a heart filled with charm.
Come my way and help me be,
A Knight, a prince he would be heaven sent,
And in all it harms none, so mote it be.”*

“I am sure you remember that,” Michael said, loosening his grip. “It was your wish, your call to me, your every thought on that night, the one you sent out to the universe. Remember, not everything can be as it seems. There are always repercussions, and one has to deal with them.”

“Who are you?” Karl asked cautiously, slowly sitting back down.

“I’m your angel,” he replied softly.

¹ Malcolm Barber: <http://www.slate.com/id/2140307/>

* * *

“I didn’t know what to say or do after that. I found myself listening to his voice but not registering anything that he was saying. I still don’t believe him – the angel thing, I mean. They don’t exist.”

Karl sensed something was wrong. Telling the psychiatrist about the meeting was probably not such a good idea. He knew very well that the doctor didn’t believe the story, and if he did, he surely needed therapy himself. There were warning signs, and slowly, desperation was settling in. *I need to leave... NOW!*

A new shrink is what he needed, or maybe no shrink at all. Alternatively, he would just have to stop telling the truth before he landed in a psyche ward at an early age. It annoyed him how these so-called professionals start judging people as soon as they hear something they think is crazy, and that is exactly what this doctor was doing. Karl felt it and did not like it one bit.

At that precise moment, the clock chimed, signalling the end of the session. Karl welcomed the sound, a silent sigh escaping him. He was, quite literally, saved by the bell. He looked at the clock and thanked it silently for its precise timely manner.

Readying himself to leave, he saw the doctor reaching for his appointment book. “I’ll call and make an appointment later,” Karl said, trying to nip it in the bud. Karl wanted to make the choice and preferred it this way. He did not trust the doctor for some reason. As he headed for the door, he turned and asked, “Does this all sound crazy, Doctor?”

The psychiatrist’s hesitation before his answer confirmed Karl’s suspicions. “It’s what *you* believe that counts, Karl.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean? This brought a surge of anger and annoyance. Karl truly now believed that these sessions were a waste of time. “I won’t be coming back,” he said quietly.

And he never did.

MARY

Mary was the closest Karl had to a sister – a person he regarded as a loyal friend and an intellectual. She was a divorced mother with two teenage children who were rather close to adulthood; one was sixteen, the other soon to be eighteen. Mary was an artist seeking her elusive, seemingly impossible big break. She didn't have money to back her up, nor did she know anyone notable who could help her get *discovered* or published. It truly was a shame, because her art was wonderful. There was a distinct flair of lines and shadows that beautifully conveyed whatever object she drew, with striking compilations of colours and shades.

Mary also taught yoga, and it was this that brought out the real Mary Pirelli, a spiritualist. Most of her paintings were spiritual and were of people she knew. On occasion, an image straight from her dreams would be captured and brought to life on her canvas. It was these two aspects of life that inspired her: dreams and people. By creating this art, she created some answers for herself, thus enriching her soul a little.

Being a spiritual believer didn't exactly put her into the occult category, but she was sometimes perceived that way because she was interested in something a little out of the ordinary, something others might not find natural or normal. But Mary was not one to care. As far as she was concerned, people had the right to think whatever they wanted, as long as they granted others the same courtesy.

Karl had entered the yoga class with a friend, and Mary sensed that he was not here of his own free will. The Fire Brigade was a stressful occupation, and to relieve this, a few yoga sessions were recommended. What many people don't realize is that doing something against your wishes causes further stress, and she saw this in Karl's eyes.

There was a heartfelt sigh from Karl as his friend booked him for the next class, and Mary remembered saying, "It's not going to be that bad."

The following week, she was surprised to see that he turned up for his first class. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Why?"

"This was not something you wanted to do. It was written all over you."

"Did it show that much?" Karl asked with a hint of embarrassment.

Mary smiled and nodded. "It showed! I'm Mary." She held out her hand and briefly waited for Karl to accept the gesture. The moment he took her hand, a slight electrical shock ran up her arm, and for a very short moment, her body shook. She hid her astonishment, pulling her hand back gently and moving from around the counter toward the front doors to lock them. Looking at her right hand, she touched her palm with a finger, still feeling that tingle, and then ushered Karl through to the yoga room.

She was happy and somewhat relieved that this class was for beginners, as she didn't have to concentrate too much on advanced techniques. Since Karl was there, she wanted to focus her attentiveness on him. The man seemed to somehow attract her, not in a sexual way, but in a spiritual sense. There was an immense surge of energy in him, and his aura glowed like some powerful force field.

Mary studied him as he struggled with his crossed legs; the awkwardness of trying to position himself comfortably and meditate while his thighs ached. Clearly, he desperately wanted to free them from this discomfort. This brought a smile to her face. She knew that there were many people who found sitting crossed leg to be unbearable. It did take practice, for it was not something the body could get used to right away.

But that aura! It was reaching out to the others, its invisible rays slowly drifting to the next person, lingering there but never touching. Mary had never seen such a beautiful vision; she had never seen such a strong aura either! In her lifetime, there had only been two incidents. The first time she saw an aura was when a friend she had been visiting in the hospital was dying of cancer. Then, she saw a dark grey aura, alternating from brown and back to grey. She dismissed this without a second thought until the second incident

when she noticed a little boy walking toward her, a dark grey-brown haze illuminating his body. She stopped and stared, her eyes focused on the youngster as he waited for the green light to authorize the crossing. Mary suddenly dashed without any explanation to run to the boy as he crossed the road. She grabbed him from behind, and with the haste and force of a football tackle, they both dived a metre away from a speeding car that ran the red light. Immediately, the colours around him changed to subtle, beautiful pastels that captured her emotions as she held the crying child in her arms.

For months on end, Mary tried to gain control of this gift, but it seemed to have a life of its own and only surfaced whenever it felt like it. She accepted the fact that it would be something her mind would not be in command of, and at this very moment, the aura she was seeing around Karl was vanishing.

The class finished, and Mary signalled him out, calling his name softly. She approached him. "So, how did you enjoy your first session?"

"Honestly, I don't think it's for me. Sorry." He shrugged and offered her a sympathetic smile.

"Don't apologize. Yoga isn't for everybody, and you're not obliged to continue taking the classes. At least you gave it a try."

"Reaching inner peace is something I don't think I am capable of doing."

"Everybody is capable of reaching inner peace. It takes a long time to master it, and that is the hardest part."

"How does one know if they've reached it?" Karl asked, a little fascinated.

"That's a good question, and a hard one to answer. We all have different ways of capturing and showing our emotions, the way we act, the way we accept things. Some people may need a little push, some guidance, and others are naturals at developing it. There is a time where one will know they have reached that sanctuary. You'll know it once you get there."

She looked him in the eyes, and her expression became serious. "I'll be honest, Karl; I asked you to stay back because there's something about you that mystifies me."

Karl was amused and interested. Raising his eyebrows, he questioned her silently with a slight curve to his lips indicating a smile.

Mary explained the aura around him and narrated the tale of her experiences, “It just happens, and I can’t control it.” She paused briefly and then said, “Yours was extremely active!” She stepped toward the main doors, ensuring that they were locked, and then switched off all the lights, only leaving the emergency exits to illuminate the room enough so she could safely navigate back to Karl.

“Meaning?”

“I don’t know, but I can say with no doubt there is something happening around you. I’d like to do a reading.” She already had her hands on a black scrying bowl and set it in front of her. Karl stared at the images of the three crones etched on the outside of the ceramic bowl. Mary reached for the chalice and stepped over to the basin, where she filled it with water. She then sat it down beside the bowl, lit four candles, and carefully positioned them at each cardinal point. Reaching for a bag of sea salt, she traced a circle around them, slowly pouring the salt to form a circle, her mouth whispering words barely audible to the human ear.

She took her position in front of Karl, poured the water from the chalice into the bowl, and then looked at him with a faint smile. She could see his curiosity and scepticism. “I know this look strange to you, but please keep an open mind.” She reached for his hand and pricked his thumb without a warning. She gently squeezed a few drops of his blood into the water.

Karl flinched, looking at his bleeding thumb. “You could have warned me!”

Mary looked down at the water, her concentration now blocking out the surroundings, her eyes fixed on the few drops of blood slowly moving around in the water in the bowl. The only sound she now heard was her breathing, and she even tried to block that out. Once she succeeded in doing this, she moved her face closer to the water, her nose only a fraction away from touching the surface. “Let me see the past to be... show me truth, so mote it be.”

There was a moment of silence before she spoke. “Four warriors on horseback armoured, each going their separate ways. There is a Red Cross, a Maltese cross on their armour. They each carry a significant book, and with each book, a special jewel encased on the cover. These men are Knights, and they are travelling to destinations

in order to conceal some unknown influence and artefacts that relate to the Enochian language.

“There is a connection between one of these Knights and yourself. It seems you two are one, but I also see some conflict, and it is naked to the eye. These Knights have disbanded to cover a secret – maybe religious – and you are or have been part of it.”

Mary looked up at him, feeling a little drained and warm.

Karl watched her as she stood, softly thanking some invisible being for its help and protection. Then, with a finger, she traced a line through the salt. “Finished.”

“You mentioned Enochian. What is that?”

“Enochian is an occult language popularized by John Dee and Edward Kelley in the sixteenth century. Dee and Kelley claimed that angels revealed it to them, though most contemporary practitioners of magic consider it a constructed language.²

“You’re telling me that angels actually came and spoke to these men? Showed them their language?” Karl had his eyebrows raised with a look of disbelief.

“I know. Quite hard to believe, isn’t it?” She switched the lights back on. “The angelic language was supposedly dictated by angels that Kelley claimed to see within a crystal ball. The angels were said to tap out letters on a table, something like a crossword puzzle but with all the cells filled in. The English translations were not tapped out, but according to Kelley, they appeared on little strips of paper coming out of the angels’ mouths.

Karl had to laugh at the thought of strips of paper coming out of an angelic mouth. “That is absurd! And people believe this?”

Mary, too, thought this all sounded ridiculous, but she continued her brief story on Kelley. “Dee considered the dictation of the angelic material as highly important for three reasons. First, he believed the angelic represented a documental case of true glossolalia, thereby proving that Kelley was actually speaking with angels and not from his imagination. Second, the angels claimed that angelic was actually the original prototype of Hebrew and was the language with which God spoke with Adam, thus the first human

² Information extracted from Wikipedia.

language. Third, the angelic material takes the form of a set of conjurations that are supposed to summon an extremely powerful set of angelic beings whom, he believed, would be able to reveal many secrets, especially the key to the Philosopher's Stone. Kelley's *angels* sometimes communicated in a special *angelic* or Enochian language, which Dee and Kelley claimed was given to them by angels. Some modern cryptographers argue that Kelley invented it, and it is not clear whether Dee was a victim or an accomplice."

"So, what does all this have to do with the Knights?"

"Dee and Kelly stated they were the first ones the angels spoke to and that they were the first to learn the angelic language. Who are we to judge whether they were charlatans or not? They may be telling the truth. There is quite a bit of history we still don't know that relates to angels and demons. The Knights back then held quite a bit of power, and with them, they buried a secret that the King of France would kill for – and that's just what he did in 1307, nearly wiping the Templars off the face of the Earth.

AN ANGEL'S CONFESSION

They did quite a number of things together, and both hit it off quite well. That first night's meeting was never brought up and the strange discussion about Karl's so-called *calling* was never mentioned again, though he had to admit it was still in the back of his mind and itching to come to the surface again. However, Karl thought it silly and let it go.

But as time went on, he actually started believing in what Michael had said that night at the café. First, he still could not get over the beauty of the man. No matter how long he stared into his face, he seemed to grow more beautiful, and Karl was slowly falling in love. Michael was with him day and night, at his side and truly like an angel guarding him. He constantly made sure Karl was comfortable, and when Karl complained of headaches, Michael had many questions about any accompanying strange symptoms. He was very gentle. The soft touch of his hand on Karl's cheeks and the tender kisses – Karl couldn't help but melt when those lips touched his.

It still concerned Michael, and though it may just be trivial, the stunning blue eyes that hypnotized him seemed wrong. He remembered asking him if all angels had such stunning blue eyes. His reply was yes. It was a trait all angels shared.

It was the first night they slept together that mysterious things began to happen. Karl didn't notice anything at first, for the afterglow of the phenomenal sexual encounter rendered him oblivious to anything around him.

He watched his partner slowly walk to the bathroom, admiring the body and everything that was him. Michael was perfect. There was not a single flaw that he could pinpoint, and Karl asked himself how such a person could exist. The physical appearance was breathtaking, his beautiful facial features were stunning, and his voice was like listening to a tenor stringing out words of beauty. He still couldn't believe that this beautiful man was here, with him.

Michael entered the bathroom, closing the door after him. Karl's eyes fixed on the light that shone through the crack below the door. He didn't know why he stared and could not explain the strange feeling he was getting. It started like butterflies in his stomach, followed by nausea that swept over him, but all the while, his gaze did not wander. Then he saw a blue glow radiating from beneath the door.

Karl sat up, moving forward until he got close to the edge of the bed. The radiance grew brighter, and in the darkness of the room, it was eerie. He could not move at all, and all of a sudden, a strong, invincible force was pulling from within the pit of his stomach – like life was being drained from his being. He wretched and brought up the evening's dinner.

When Karl looked back at the bathroom door, the glow was gone, and the door opened. Michael saw Karl leaning over the bed and then toward the mess beside it. Quickly, he stepped over to him. A look of concern grew in his eyes, and he slowly looked away in shame.

Karl didn't know what to say. In fact, he was a little scared and did not feel like asking questions. He didn't want any more surprises, but he couldn't stop his curiosity from taking control.

"What was that?" Karl pushed himself back on the bed, and Michael stood beside him. He was quiet and only stared.

"Well?"

Finally, he sat next to Karl, took hold of his hands, and said only, "You will see."

Karl stared into his eyes. They seemed to change into a sea of water, and Karl found himself hypnotized. He heard his voice telling him to close his eyes. As he spoke, images formed, clear and concise. He saw himself standing in a ruined field, and from a close distance, he could see a man dragging behind him a canvas sack. He was wounded and tired – a Templar. He had fallen and was struggling to get back on his feet. Beside him, a glow of blue light hovered, becoming brightly intense and slowly forming to a human shape. It was Michael!

Karl was transported to another place much older than the one he had just witnessed. However, he could not quite tell whether this place was real or not. It did not look real, and there were hardly any structures to make whatever this place was seem authentic. There

were many people wandering, but not lost. Their expressions were serene, and each had that same wonderful blue radiance around them.

“What is this place? Who are these people?” he asked.

“They are my kind. Angels. Before I became one. You are looking at a time before man was not born.”

Karl shook himself awake, withdrawing his hands and slowly feeling the nausea building in his stomach again. “I don’t know what to say, what to believe.”

Michael sat on the edge of the bed. “My parents died when I was young, and I don’t have any brothers and sisters. I grew up in a monastery and was taught by the monks. My mum died moments after I was born.”

This surprised Karl, as he didn’t expect this from Michael. But as much as he didn’t want him to continue, the story needed to be heard.

“They couldn’t stop the bleeding. She was haemorrhaging internally. I don’t know too much about it. Dad never spoke of it. As for my dad, I loved him so much. From what I can remember, he was at my side day and night until he got quite ill and passed on. I must have been around twelve years old, though I’m not exactly sure. In any case, I grew up without really knowing my parents.”

“I didn’t have much of a childhood, either,” Michael continued, his blue eyes now fixed on Karl. “My father was quite friendly with a number of monks, and they were the ones who raised me, taught me. I travelled and learned so much about different cultures throughout the world, studying ancient religions and languages. It is such a big world out there, Karl. There is so much knowledge if we will only look for it.

“The monks enjoyed having a child of their own to raise and found it appropriate to use their money for my travels and tuition. They organized some sort of trust fund. I never knew this, but I would receive envelopes with cash in it to help me survive. Apparently there was enough money in there to last me my whole lifetime.”

“So, how did you become what you are now?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes, I do. Maybe it can help me understand what is going on and to believe that I am actually having a conversation with an angel. So yes; please tell me!”

MICHAEL

Michael reflected on his childhood, which was a little out of the ordinary to say the least. It never really was a childhood at all. The strangest part of it all was there was not much to remember apart from constant study and being looked after by strangers who secretly sent him money and every now and then letters to instruct him of his next destination around the world.

There was one moment in his teenage years that he remembered quite vividly, the time he and his father went on an excursion to visit some spiritual Pagan relics somewhere in northern Ireland. A cave, countless years old, once used by the Druids as their temple, had been finally allowed to be reopened after many years of safety inspections. It was used in this century as a temple by the Druid church.

A few metres from the cave was an old concrete altar, and etched on top of the slab were Pagan markings signifying the elements of the Earth and other symbols representing the Wiccan craft. "Tonight, you will be initiated here where the original Druids skilfully practiced their art," his father had said to him. Michael also remembered the many hours he spent studying Druid law and was familiar with the whole initiation process. This was his destiny, and he accepted it the way his father accepted his providence.

There was such a big fuss that night. He felt like he was royalty, the way the men and women pampered him. Inside the cave, a priest bathed him, and though Michael objected many times and asked to be alone, the priest took no notice, and with a smile, commenced his chore. Michael took a deep breath and decided that this was the only moment where he could take advantage of a once in a lifetime indulgence. He was towelled dry, and another priest stepped into the room with underwear and a velvet white robe neatly folded and resting on his outstretched arms.

Michael's hair was brushed, and his temples and wrists were anointed with Abra Melin oil. The time was ten forty-five in the

evening, and there were less than twenty minutes between the beginning of this ritual and the celebration of his fourteenth birthday. It was said that in the thirteenth year, one must study for a whole year and prepare for the initiation, which took place on the fourteenth birthday. This was not a formal procedure that had to take place, but if one were ready for the acceptance, the feast of becoming would be celebrated.

Michael's father crossed the threshold into the sacred room, and the priests stepped out. As they did, they tossed a pinch of frankincense into a burner beside the door. "Come and sit next to me."

Michael gazed at his father, and he could see a warm glow radiating from his pores. His aura was a halo of brightness, and it reached out to him, engulfing Michael and swallowing him to make both father and son into one.

"Do you understand what is happening to you?"

"Yes, father. I am accepting my existence within the world of spirituality."

"And?" his father prodded.

"To teach and lead others in need of guidance."

He touched his son's face tenderly. "Is this what you really want, Michael? Remember, this may be your destiny, but it is not the path you must take so early in life. Understand this. It is a big responsibility for one of such a tender age, and your youth can be lost."

Michael had nothing to consider. He knew exactly what to do, and he was ready. "I'm okay, and I am prepared for what is ahead of me. I may not be educated in mathematical equations or hold a degree in modern science and technology, but you have taught me the most important lessons – how to cope and exist in this life."

"And The Craft will help you along, though there is still so much to learn and understand."

The hug they both offered each other was crucial to their affection for one another, for Michael only saw his father a few more times before the man's heart suddenly exploded. The sad thing was that Michael had lost his mother at birth, and now that his father had passed on, his life was on his own. Though the Druids were always there for him, he would never see them. They would forever be hidden from his view.

The money he received would always come by mail, and it was always enough to last a month or more. The anonymous letters only appeared when something was arranged for him: a visit to a foreign country to study the ancient laws of the land, where he would be greeted by people who seemed to know of him, but Michael never quizzed them about their knowledge of his family and did as was instructed in the letter. He would spend days, sometimes weeks in monasteries in Tibet to Thailand, then journey to Scotland and England to live amongst Pagans.

Several years passed. He had travelled the globe, studied the great beliefs of the Old World, learned and practiced the art of Wicca, and studied anthropology. By his twenty-first birthday, Michael had seen and done more than the average person would do in half their lifetime. But of course, it didn't end there.

He was invited back to Ireland to be initiated for a second time, and it was there he met with a monk who taught him the art of divination, but there was also something else the monk was skilled in – the art of male bonding.

Eaton admired Michael for his dedication, and Michael returned the admiration, for he found Eaton to be highly skilled in the arts, and there was something about the man he was attracted to. This feeling was not the first. On many occasions throughout his journeys, he would find himself magnetically drawn to someone. Sexually, this person aroused him, and these feelings confused him, though he never did anything about it or said anything to that matter.

Until now.

Eaton so much wanted to make his move, and though he was a good ten years older than Michael, the younger man was his senior in other matters, and respect was of the utmost importance. Nevertheless, he needed to aid Michael in discovering his inner desires. Eaton was a little afraid at taking such risks with him, a man who was prophesized to hold the key to life, theoretically possessing the strongest of all Druid powers.

It had been close to eight months, and Eaton's urges to be with Michael only grew stronger. It happened on a cold, wet evening in July, the rain having more of a calming effect than a natural annoyance. Both were seated on the floor dressed in silk robes, and in between them was a copper bowl filled with water. The bowl had a mirrored base.

Eaton took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. There were second thoughts entering his mind, but Michael sensed something was wrong and looked up at him with slight concern. "Is there anything bothering you?"

"Matter of fact, there is, but I don't want to hassle you with it."

"Talk to me."

There was a moment's silence, and then Eaton said, "I like you, Michael. I like you very much. If my honesty troubles you or makes you uncomfortable, just say so, and I will call for another to take my place."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Take my hands and look into the bowl." Michael held Eaton's hands and did as he was instructed. "I want you to conjure in your mind something that has been hiding inside you. Unleash the feeling that may be tormenting you with uncertainty, an answer that you require that is puzzling you."

Michael knew precisely where Eaton was going with this and played along with an interest that gripped him. Staring into the bowl of steady water, he saw the mirror at the base of the bowl and threw his thoughts directly to the mirror. It seemed that Eaton had done the same thing, for images had surfaced from the mirror showing two naked male bodies entwined together.

Michael let go of Eaton's hands. He didn't really know what he expected to see, but the provocative image was not what he had anticipated. Still, his loins suddenly seemed like they were on fire, and before he thought about what he was going to do, he moved forward and cupped Eaton's face with his hands and kissed him.

"I'm sorry," Michael quickly apologized, and was on his feet, his back to Eaton. He faced the window looking out into the night, feeling a little awkward, maybe humiliated at the sudden act. "I shouldn't have done that. It was not right of me."

He felt Eaton standing behind him but could not bring himself to face him. "These feelings I have, are they taboo? Will I be shunned for this type of behaviour?" Suddenly, hands rested on his shoulder and slowly turned him to face Eaton, who wore a comforting smile. His features had somehow become so angelic that emotions took control, and Michael started to cry.

With a finger, Eaton wiped away the salty tears. "We do not judge people because of their sexual preference. I, too, am

homosexual. You need to accept it, for it is not your choice. Understand, Michael, that what you are does not make any difference. It doesn't change your soul. You are a good man, initiated to second degree, and that alone proves what a great person you are. I know it is not easy, and it has taken me a while to get used to living this way. I also choose to keep this to myself."

"Show me what it's like to love a man."

Michael remembered that evening so vividly, and there was something about that night that made it special. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he had never encountered such tender moments. Maybe it was because it was his first experience and Eaton being so affectionate. His words had been soothing, and he was very careful not to do anything that Michael didn't want him to do.

It was a cherished memory, and for years, Michael doubted that there would be any other person who would take Eaton's place. To his surprise, he found the person who essentially warmed his heart though the rules affirmed that such affairs were not permissible. Well, rules were made to be broken, and he was not going to let his spirituality or principles get in his way, above all, interfering with his life. They had intervened too much throughout his life, dictated his moves, and watched him circumspectly.

He respected their laws and appreciated what they had done for him, especially after the death of his father. He was thirty-one now, and he needed control of his life. God only knew why he hadn't done this years ago.

He had given so much, and now he wanted something in return. He knew very well that they were not going to be happy with his decision. In fact, he was not really happy at all carrying out this responsibility. The key to life? He still did not exactly know what that meant, but he had a slight idea that it had something to do with guidance, with assisting the lost in discovering their true meaning. He was a psychologist, a mentor meeting with people who needed his help.

But he had to face the fact that there was a destiny to fulfil. He still didn't know exactly what it was and what it really meant, but it was there. Also, there were other issues and other memories he couldn't remember, and so many times, he tried to bring them to the surface, but nothing came to mind.

No matter what the past held, Michael was going to make the most of his life.

Until the very end.

And the end was near.

Little did he know that his purpose in life had already been written, and though the last chapter of his life was slowly unfolding, Michael felt the end drawing closer. How, he did not know, but it was close at hand... and so he waited.

The apparition came to him some time around midnight. *Was it a dream? Was it a spirit? Was I asleep when this happened?* Nonetheless, the occurrence was valid. His father appeared to him, his presence unexpected, though the glow of warmth he produced was heartfelt.

“Michael, it is time,” his father told him. The radiant smile he wore tore at Michael’s emotions. “Your calling has arrived. Remember, Son, before you were born, your destiny was already created. It is why you were put through – to study and gain knowledge of all humanity. Now, it is time for you to start your quest, to guide and protect.”

When his father vanished, the last thing he remembered were not only his father’s words, but also his eyes closing and ascending into the air, hovering over a still body that lay beneath him. There had been an intense drawing into the air, and he fought not to soar any higher, but the strength it had was too great for him. It was a magnetic force pulling him into the unknown. He had to stop resisting when a blinding light appeared in front of him, and from it, his father emerged extending a hand toward him.

“What is happening to me?” Michael was surprised he was able to hear himself talk.

“You will see.”

Michael looked back at his body as he took hold of his father’s hand. “Am I dead?”

“In a way, yes. Your soul has projected from your body. You will be returning to it soon, but as a different entity. Death is only the beginning, for it will give you a chance to become a different soul – an angel amongst men, Michael; a guide to assist the unexplained. Humanity is not ready for such phenomena to be leashed on Earth, and there are many people who are greedy for such knowledge to be used for self-gain. We are guides like the archangels Michael and

Gabriel, who appear to those who are in desperate need of assistance to carry out the true nature of what the universe does not want to reveal.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“The archangels are our ancestors, Michael, and we are of their descendants. But in time, you will understand. Now, you must return to your body. You will still be the person you are, only you will be immortal. This is the destiny that awaits you.”

There were many questions he needed to ask, but he was slowly being pulled back into his body as his father faded. He opened his eyes and hopped off the bed in a panic.

He stepped toward the mirror and gazed at himself, carefully searching for... for faults? Changes? What was he looking for? And then, there it was. He was looking right at them – blue eyes, so blue, so different. He remembered them being brown, and then there they were, a mesmerizing, hypnotizing blue.

“The longer you look into them, the more you’ll find yourself falling into your dream.”

The strange voice shook him awake as he quickly turned to see a stranger standing behind him. “And who are you? Where the hell did you come from?”

“Ah, hell is correct, my dear Michael, though I am a little saddened that you don’t remember who I am. Think back, my dear friend, way back to the times where it was only us who existed.”

Michael did look back and saw images beyond recognition. They flashed by until they suddenly stopped, and there he was in another body beside Samael.

“Yes,” Samael began with a grin. “I remain the same, though you have Druid blood, a bloodline that goes far back into time which only allows the soul to move from one generation to another. You are the seventh reincarnation, and I had to endure all of your seven rebirths.” Samael sighed and sat on the bed.

“You are...” Michael began, though he could not quite finish his words. He knew who this man was, yet the idea of his very existence was frightening.

“Yes, Michael, it is I. Your lovable enemy. Always with you, always beside you, always there to ensure the balance between good and evil. However, really, I am not such a bad person. Call me mischievous, if you will!”

Michael sat next to Samael and looked at him with extreme surprise. “The war in heaven! You were cast out.”

“You are remembering.”

“So why are you here?”

“As I said, there is a balance and a purpose. It will come to you in due time. I am not here to guide you, my old friend. I am here to make it a little difficult for you to accomplish your purpose.” Samael was on his feet, and a blue shimmer began to radiate around him. “I will be seeing you very soon, Michael.”

He watched Samael grow fainter and then vanish. He stepped back to the mirror and again concentrated on his eyes. He focused on them, watching them stare back, slowly hypnotizing him. It was then he noticed a blue halo around himself and feathered wings protruding from behind him. He fainted.

* * *

Karl stared in awe. There was nothing he could say. He was still trying to understand how all this could be true. It seemed that his life was an endless road of unexpected events. From one incident to another, stumbling across something he couldn't quite explain. *Is it fate? Is this what it's really all about?*

He looked at Michael, and there was a sadness in his eyes that filled him with confusion. “I just don't know what to believe! I feel I am going crazy. Countless times, I have seen strange things happening around me, especially since I met you. At night, all I think about is you. Michael, you scare me!”

“It is not me that you need to be afraid of.” Karl felt the softness of Michael's hand on his cheek. “I know of all the pain you have gone through in your life, but the battle which you will be facing has already started, and it will carry a much greater pain. I am sorry to tell you this, but yes, it is fate.”

“What battle?”

“You will soon know, my love. Soon.”

“Then why are you here? Why did you come to me?”

“Angels are guides and protectors, but we cannot protect you from other beings. There will be men after you – after your knowledge – and these people are of extreme importance. I ask you to not trust anyone. I will show you the correct path to take and guide

you to where you have to go, but I cannot protect you from any combat that you come across.”

“You are really scaring me, Michael.” Karl hopped off the bed, pacing the room in thought. “Why is this happening? I still can’t understand why I’m involved.” He looked at Michael, pleading “You can answer that for me, can’t you?”

There was a moment of silence as Michael stared down at his hands. “Karl, have you ever traced your ancestry? It will be difficult to find that you have the blood of one of the Knights. I have seen the births of each child through each generation. I have seen the deaths as well, but it was important to keep the bloodline going. There are four of you, four descendants, and like you, they, too, are going through a confused time. However, they also have a task to complete.”

“And that task is?”

“To retrieve the four books written by four angels, and only the power of the Knight’s bloodline is able to repossess those books.”

“Fine. You have answered why I’m involved, but what is the significance that surrounds these mysterious books?”

“Your friend will be able to answer that. Listen to her, take her advice, and ask for her help. She may be able to assist you where I can’t.”

Karl sat down next to Michael and grabbed his hand. He felt a sudden heat running through him and saw the blue shimmer around his hand, slowly moving up his arm. The nauseous reaction he felt before came back, only not as intense. He smiled, looking up at Michael. “I’m getting used to it.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot stay with you tonight.”

“I don’t want you to go. I need you here tonight. I don’t think I can bear it all on my own.”

“As much as I would like to stay, I can’t.” He stood and traced a finger along Karl’s cheekbone. “Remember, I will always be near you.” He stepped in front of the long mirror and turned to face Karl. “Did you know that mirrors are believed to be doorways to the other dimensions?”

Karl did not answer. The question seemed out of place, like everything else he had heard. Then, he watched in disbelief as Michael walked through it.

* * *

The fever had struck him severely, and the journey to his final destination was ever so close to completion. Though his energy was depleted, he had to make the last stage of his journey, and Michael was sure to guide him through. He often thought of his brothers. What perils did they stumble across? Were they captured and tortured to reveal their secrets? Michael did admit to him that one had encountered some difficulties, but his passage to the sacred site was his, and all three, himself included, would make the trek.

If it were not for Michael, he was certain that he would fall to the ground and let the fever consume him. He had walked for miles. The armour he wore was heavy and really of no consequence, as he no longer needed it for protection. The way he felt, death would be a welcome visitor. He struggled a little as he forced the metal tunic over his head and tossed it to one side. That felt much better, but his clothes were saturated with sweat, and the chilly night air swept through the drenched clothes and into every pore in his body. He fell to his knees; the large canvas bag he had dragged behind him for the last sixteen miles rested alone, the handle of the sword looking up into the starry night with its jewel centred in the middle like an eye peering at the darkened surroundings and wondering where its final resting place would be.

“Michael, help me!” he screamed, suddenly afraid he would be heard. He looked around in panic. He was alone. There was no one to hear the screams of a dying man. He was on some land, maybe an old cemetery. Yes, it was some kind of cemetery. A battle had been fought here, and many had died, buried here where they were slain. There were no markers, tombs, or any such symbols to indicate the dead, but he could feel them. He felt the sadness as his eyes roamed the area. Maybe he would soon join the sleeping.

“Oh no, your journey has not ended,” Michael said, appearing beside him. He handed him a flask of water and motioned him to sit on the ground. “It is hard to accept the fact that one has to do what must be done, especially not knowing the reasons behind it or why one was chosen to do it. It would be like questioning myself as to why I exist to guard and guide people such as you. Why did I become Michael? And why is this journey so important? You can dig a hole right here and bury the book. What difference does it make?”

“Yes, what difference does it make?” the Knight repeated.

“It makes a big difference. Each of you has been tasked with locating the exact position of the watchtowers where the guardians are waiting. You and your brothers are the only ones who know the language of the book, the Enochian language only to be understood by the angels themselves. There are four cardinal points on this Earth, and once found, each of you must prepare that sacred ground to rest the book until each tome is ready to be received by four individuals who will fully understand the meaning within the sacred pages.”

“And what will happen to me once I have completed the task? Will I be discarded? Will I be rewarded? Will I live an eternity just like you?”

Michael gently touched the Knight’s face, offering a serene smile, his eyes glowing with comfort. “I cannot answer that, as it is not my place to foretell the future.”

“But you know the final outcome. Will you be with me when the time comes?”

“Ill always be with you...”

* * *

Karl slowly opened his eyes. The dream surprised him, particularly because he was unable to picture the Knight in any detail. He never saw the Knight’s face. Of course, he hadn’t seen Michael’s face either, but he knew it was Michael because that was the name the Knight had called out. *Could that have been Archangel Michael? My Michael?*

He gave the dream no further thought and sat waiting for Michael.

And he waited.

* * *

So, that’s how it all started. Crazy? Maybe. I still think this was all madness, a joke being played on me, but one would have to be extremely clever to pull off a stunt like. Walking through mirrors? What? Was I actually descending into a world of insanity? Maybe

reality and fantasy were merging into one. Maybe I did not know what was real anymore.

Michael never returned that night, and neither did he come by the following morning. My answering machine was overloaded, mostly with calls from work. *Let them call. I think I will just enjoy the time adjusting to my newfound emotional state of madness.*

Also, there is this nagging, uncontrollable feeling of want. I have never in my life wanted anyone so badly. Michael was part of me now, and not a day went by where I didn't think of him. Constantly, I felt him with me, flowing through my veins, in my mind. I felt lost when he was not around, and by God, I wanted him so much!

I really did not know what to do. I seemed to have lost my will to do anything, and I still could not bring myself to believe that the Templar story and that *Book of Secrets* nonsense was all real. And me, a bloodline Templar? Laughter took control of me – one of the signs that mental illness was surfacing – an uncontrollable laugh that brought tears to my eyes. But seriously, what was so funny?

The mirror caught my attention, and I couldn't help but step in front of it, slowly tracing my finger across the glass. I expected my hand to go through it, but nothing of the sort happened. I pressed my palm to it, and still nothing. But as I slowly pulled my hand away, a blue handprint glowed against the glass. "Ah, Wicca at its full power," I said aloud, and again laughter took hold of me.

I needed to be in control and at least keep an open mind. If there was truth to this madness and the books did exist, imagine the publicity! There would be fame and money to be had, I was sure of it. Maybe insanity had its benefits after all.

That is it Karl, get a grip. Start thinking logically. The first logical step was to find that book, which was impossible. *Think, Karl, THINK! The dreams... were they the clues?*

"Look beyond your dreams."

I looked at the mirror where the voice came from and faintly saw Michael in front of a church bearing the words *Lady of Divine Love*. And then, the whole image disappeared.

"But where is it?" I asked.

"Remember, there are others who can help you."

"Shit." I was getting a little agitated now. I regained my composure, trying hard not to let my emotions get the best of me.

What I needed to do was believe, accept the truth, and go along with the journey. And if all this was a joke, then so be it.

I now understood how insanity develops, when the unreal becomes real and the mind is not powerful enough to accept it. No matter how much I tried to believe in all this, I couldn't admit it to myself, but I would try nevertheless.

A hero in an action adventure movie. Yes, that's what I'll be. A doctor of anthropology, Doctor Reeves. Doctor Karl Reeves. Not bad. I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled.

"Look out, Indiana Jones. A new hero is born." Leaving my fedora and bullwhip behind for the moment, I was off to meet with Mary.

THE TRUTH SURFACES

Mary was hidden behind numerous books piled on the desk, some of them opened to relevant pages and marked with a torn piece of paper stating which paragraph was significant to her research. Other books were closed, either yet to be explored or holding no importance to her study.

Karl hadn't even pulled up a chair when Mary excitedly started talking, not for a moment gazing away to look at him. "I was right, and I bet there is a connection!"

"Mary?"

She waved a hand to silence him. "No time to question. Who would have thought that this could all be real?" She reached for an open book. "The Templar Knights were executed by the king of France. Only a handful escaped – four to be exact – and each carried a book. Nobody knows what those books contained, but it is believed each was hidden in a different corner of the earth – north, south, east, and west – in a specific spot guided by each of the four archangels; Michael south, Gabriel west, Oriel north, and Raphael east.

"The Archangels were called the *great heralds of good news*, announcing the great and most glorious. Their service consisted of revealing prophecies, knowledge, and understanding and also protecting the secrets that were not ready to be revealed and guarding these secrets from any type of evil influence. Therefore, each archangel protected a Knight until a sacred spot was located to hide the cardinal *Book of Secrets*. Until this very day, nobody knows of the whereabouts of these books, or if they even exist.

"But...!" Mary lifted a finger, paused, and looked around the table, finding the textbook with a pencil embedded between its pages. She opened it and traced down the page with the back of the pencil. "According to Pagan Christians, the archangels will reveal themselves to four people who will gain the knowledge in locating these texts. The first sign of recognition is a blue aura, only to be

seen by the chosen Knight.” Mary looked at Karl for the first time, her eyebrows raised in question. “Sound familiar?”

Karl shook his head in disbelief. “Who would have thought something like this would happen in this century?”

“What is so different between now and then? Actually, the answer is this. We live in a society where people are closed-minded. Most live for themselves and don’t accept any truths that do not concern them. We are more materialistic, and that is why we consider this sort of thing nonsense and can’t believe in it.”

“Mary, these books may not have any truth to them. Look at what you are reading.” Karl pointed at the books on the table and picked one up to show her the cover. “*The Book of Fact or Fiction!*” He picked up another. “*The Journey of Time: A History of Beliefs?*”

She took a deep breath and sighed. “And I’m sure you told your doctor how confused you are, how strange things are happening and you can’t understand what they are and why they are happening. And here you are belittling me. I know you have already seen something, so stop bloody hiding it!”

This was true. It seemed okay to tell a stranger that his life was in turmoil, but it seemed impossible to tell a friend that she may be right about something he truly wanted to disbelieve. *Ah, the ego! I am a man, and I will not show you that I am afraid.* Inside, he was crumbling and confused, but he wasn’t about to show Mary that and risk his masculine pride.

“Sorry,” he apologized, and then urged her to go on.

“Okay, fine. Now keep an open mind, please, as I’ve been asking you all along. Say that this is all true and you are one of the four who has been chosen, that somewhere in the world, three more people are experiencing the same thing.”

“And what happens after they have been chosen? Do the four of us go and look for these secret books? And when – or if – we find them, what is the next chapter? Do the gates of heaven open up? Do dwarves and elves and fairies and goblins come out and dance for us?”

Mary frowned. “You’re a bag of laughs, aren’t you? In fact, each *Book of Secrets* holds the key to the entrance of the watchtowers guarded by those who are awake; the Elders, the ancient race of the watchers of the heavens. The four watchtowers are associated with the four cardinal points – north, south, east and west. They are

supposed to be symbolic structures called upon to guard over a circle during a ritual and are dismissed when the ceremony is complete. But it is believed that the watchtowers are doors, and the guardians are exactly that; they guard these doors. When the circle is cast in ritual magic, one may have the power to see these doors, and these guardians not only protect you, but also anything else that tries to get through.”

“And what’s on the other side?”

“Nobody knows. Maybe it is a superstition, some sort of fairytale for sheer entertainment. But then again, there was the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant, the Spear of Destiny.”

“Yeah, and those first two helped make Harrison Ford rich!”

Mary ignored the remark, though she could not help smiling. “Finally, the person who finds the *Book of Secrets* will also find the hidden Templar treasures. With each book is buried the Templar sword, which has jewels embedded in its handle, and the corresponding watchtower and its archangel inscribed on the sword. Gold coins and more jewels will be found also, but the treasure is not the coins or the jewels – it’s the book. The prize isn’t money or riches – it’s finding the answer to our existence and gaining absolute peace.”

“So, you have the four archangels, the four watchtowers, you have the guardians of the watchtowers, and the four Knights, along with the corresponding cardinal points. Then, I come into the picture. So, a hidden book needs to be found, yet there is no mention of the exact location?”

“Not that I can find.”

“What about the name *Lady of Divine Love*? Have you come across anything with that text?”

Mary thought for a moment, and then gazed at the pile of books, scattering a few here and there. She found what she was looking for and frantically searched for the page. It took her a few minutes, and then she read the text to Karl:

“The Templars searched for many years for hidden underground passages to hide their belongings: The Ark of the Covenant, the Holy Grail, and many other possessions they held. These secret passages would be the final resting place not only for the Templars, but also for the priceless artefacts each carried.”

“In England, they found tunnels beneath the city. Now in Rome, more tunnels have been found.”

“So what? I don’t follow you.”

“The Templars have been using hidden tunnels for many years, not only as escape routes, but also as dwellings. If the four books do exist, they’re probably in these tunnels.”

“Don’t you think that’s long shot? There are professors and professionals in this field who I am sure would have already thought of that.”

“Yes, but how many know about these books? The books are explained in these texts, but have any of them ever been found?”

“We don’t know that they—”

“Exactly! So, that is why we are going to Rome.”

Karl looked at her, astonished. “Are you mad? And what makes you think they are going to allow two amateur sleuths to walk through what could possibly be a dangerous and unstable tunnel to find a book which, if it did exist, would crumble at the touch?”

“You either need to get laid or chill out a little.” Mary smiled. “You seem to have given up your career, so what are you doing with yourself now? Nothing. I’ll arrange the flight. Roma, here we come.”

Karl left Mary at the table, her eyes following his moves to the exit. As she turned back to the books, she was taken aback by a stranger standing beside her. Immediately, she smiled as she gazed upon features that were exotically beautiful.

“You research your work very well,” the stranger said.

“Why, thank you. I’m Mary.”

“And I am Samael. There is one thing you have missed: there is always a balance, no matter what – light and dark, good and evil, black and white. If you find something, then something will be lost. There is always an opposite, and there is always a warning.”

Mary became mesmerized, his words echoing in her mind. He held her with his eyes for a moment as she slowly fell into a trance. Just as she was about to fall forward, she awoke, rubbing her eyes.

There was no trace of Samael anywhere.

MICHAEL AND SAMIAEL

“You had no right appearing to her.”

“I do what I please.”

“And remember, that was what got you into trouble in the first place.”

“Only trying to teach them that life is a balancing act. In fact, Michael, I was trying to assist her. The human brain can be so stubborn!”

“And what about Francis?”

“Now he is a specimen that certainly will be welcomed into hell,” Samael laughed. “The stupidity of mankind. And will you stop me from getting his soul? I have entered his mind, and the essence of evil is waiting to shed itself. And to think, the Catholic Church has respect for him and its order! They are just as evil in their ways.”

“What are his intentions?”

“He wants the books. He desires all four of them, and he is the type of man who will stop at nothing to get them.”

“And of course you are going to help him?”

“Of course. Remember the balance, my friend. Though he wouldn’t need my help that much. His occult powers are quite strong. His sidekick, however, does not seem to trust him. He carries innocence within his soul.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Samael. We have known each other for a very long time. Can’t you see that you will never win the souls of innocents? We can fight for centuries, yet it is I who will always conquer.”

“My dear friend, I may be losing this battle, but one day, I shall claim a soul. If I claim even that one, it will be a great victory.”

Michael clapped him on the back. “Not while I’m around. You will never understand the reasons behind all this, Samael.”

“Reasons? I was shunned to roam for eternity.”

“For being stubborn, self-centred, and so many other despicable traits you carry that annoyed us all. You made up your own rules,

started your own army, and for what? Because you wanted to reign? Now, look at you. And you have not changed. You want this soul because you want access to the watchtowers. Neither you nor I or any other person living or dead will have the chance to open these doors.”

“Remember, Michael, there are three others. I still have a chance.”

“Ah, Samael, you never cease to amaze me with your stupidity.” There was laughter from Michael.

“Yes, my friend, laugh now if you please. One day, I shall be the one who laughs. Then, we shall see who the stupid one was. Now go and protect your loved one. The sight of two bodies entwined sickens me.”

“That is because your selfishness has gotten in the way of knowing what it feels like to be able to love another. It is one of the reasons your existence is so very pathetic and sad. Ah, Samael, even when we are no more, you will be the one left roaming a world that is nonexistent. You will be utterly alone.”

“Do not pity me. In fact, it is you who will be alone. At least I do not get attached to the souls I protect, only to watch them leave. I do not allow them to break my heart. I have lost count of the times I have seen you in such a pitiful state!”

“That is rubbish, for there have only been a couple of times, and yes, my attachments were real. I have never regretted the joys of such feelings; feelings I remind you that you will never experience. You cannot be heartbroken if you do not have a heart, Samael.”

A roar emitted from Samael, his laughter echoing through Michael’s ears. “You have waited for this soul for hundreds of years, the same soul that inhabited that Knight in Malta, and here you are now, protecting and shielding it like a hoard of gold. I have seen how you are when you are with him. You have not forgotten him, have you? I care not for such emotions. They only distract, and your so-called High Almighty has taken from me such emotions.”

“That is ridiculous! We all have emotions. It is you who does not want to feel them. You have blocked them for so many years that you are not aware of them. Anyway, enough of this talk.” He turned to face Samael and slowly spread his wings. “I will see you around, my friend.” And with that, Michael was gone.

PART TWO
INVESTIGATIONS

NEWS EXTRACT:

A massive labyrinth of ancient and (until now) secret underground passages built by the Knights Templar and linked to the Holy Grail has been found in the historic town of Hertford in southeastern England, not far from the site of the major Templar preceptory of Temple Dinsley. Incredibly, most of the labyrinth remains hidden, along with its secrets. It is possible that parts of the underground network are still in use by the Knights Templar.

Informers claiming links to the original Templars, who are said to still be operational in Hertford, notified the Hertfordshire Mercury newspaper. The paper was unable to publish all the information because it includes secret underground routes to several bank vaults. This is all the more intriguing given the Templars' historic connections to banking, treasure, and secret excavations.

Temple Dinsley and the surrounding area has been a focus for treasure hunters, including King Edward III, as well as people on their own quests to find the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant, which many people believe to be in the care of the Templars.

When the Templars dissolved, most of the Order vanished, along with their unparalleled hoard of treasure and religious/esoteric knowledge. Many people believe that the Templars discovered the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail and hid these artefacts. Until now, many people have sought to excavate various places, including Scotland's Rosslyn Chapel and various sites in Hertfordshire, to look for these treasured artefacts.

THE CRUSADER TREASURE

It was at the foot of Jebel Madhbah, close to the Spring of Moses, that in the 1180s a group of English Knights discovered a treasure which may have included the Ark of the Covenant.

Below Jebel Madhbah, to the north, lays a valley called Wadi Musa, the *Valley of Moses*. For years, this valley was an important trade route through the Shara Mountains, and by Roman times, the splendid city of Petra had been built there. The city of Petra was annexed by the Romans in AD106 and ultimately declined with the fall of the Roman Empire. By the time of the Islamic conversion of the area Arabs in the seventh century, it was abandoned altogether. In the twelfth century, Crusaders from European countries such as France and England conquered Jerusalem and set up a Christian kingdom in what is now Israel. In order to protect Christian interests in the region, various orders of Knights were founded. One of these, the Knights Templar, briefly occupied the ruined city of Petra and built a series of forts to protect the trading route that ran through the Wadi Musa.

According to the Arab chronicler Numairi, who wrote around AD1300, in the 1180s, these Knights discovered a sealed cave at Jebel Madhbah, where they found “treasures of pure gold, precious stones, and a golden chest.” There was no specific reference to the Ark of the Covenant, but the Knight did claim that these were holy relics that had belonged to the ancient Israelites. Numairi described the chest as being made from panelled gold with two winged figures on the lid, which he described as being similar to ancient statues that still survived in his native Egypt. Unfortunately, he did not give the dimensions of the chest, which may have been any size. The description was very similar to that of the Ark, if it were large enough. In fact, according to the Bible, the Ark was made shortly after the Israelites left Egypt and, as they had been enslaved there for generations, their craftsmen may well have been influenced by Egyptian art.

Who were the Knights Templar who discovered the treasure at Jebel Madhbah in the 1180s? The Knights Templar were originally monks of the Cistercian order who had taken a vow to fight for Christianity in the Holy Land. They became immensely rich from their conquests in the Middle East and used this wealth to found Templar monasteries throughout Europe. Called preceptories, these monasteries served as both centres of religious devotion and training camps for these warrior monks. It was the founder of one of these preceptories in England, Ralph de Sudeley, who was the responsible for building the crusader forts in Petra during the 1180s. In 1189, the Arabs reconquered what is now southern Jordan, and the Templars were forced to abandon the Wadi Musa and return to England, evidently with the treasures they had found.

Had the Knights Templar stationed in the Wadi Musa really found the treasures from the Temple of Solomon that were hidden by Jeremiah in the sixth century BC? Had they found the Ark of the Covenant? In 2003, Graham Phillips decided to investigate.

RETURN TO ENGLAND

When the Order of the Knights Templar was founded in France in the early 1100s, its members were French Cistercian monks who vowed to fight for Christianity in the Holy Land. Within fifty years, however, men from other European countries such as Germany and England joined the ranks, and many of these were far from being monks. Most were either professional soldiers or simply adventurers whose motives were a combination of glory and greed. After all, rich pickings were to be had from plundering the Moslem population of the Middle East. Although the Knights Templar Order still considered itself to be an army of holy warriors, by the 1180s it was more like an early version of the Foreign Legion: an international militia under French control that made up its numbers with mercenaries and adventurers. One such adventurer was Ralph de Sudeley, the leader of the Templars who apparently found the treasure at Jebel Madhbah in the 1180s. He was a wealthy English Knight who joined the Templars in the Holy Land in 1182, and in 1189, he returned to his home at Herdewyke in the country of Warwickshire in central England, only ten miles from what would later be Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon.

On his arrival home, de Sudeley immediately bought a large estate in the area and founded a Templar preceptory to train new recruits for a fresh Crusade planned by the English King Richard I. During this period, there was no such thing as a full-time, professional army in England, and in wartime, troops were supplied by landlords, who raised the required number of men from among their tenants. Most of these were sent into battle with little or no training. The exception, however, could be found in warrior orders such as the Knights Templar. A Templar preceptory was therefore a strange cross between a military base and a monastery. While they were there, the monks lived a monastic life in one part of the camp, while the laymen lived in traditional barracks in another part of the base.

The local *Feet of Fines*, contemporary records of land and property holdings, show that de Sudeley's preceptory possessed expensive holy relics brought back from the Middle East. An entry for the year 1192 included mention of certain sacred artefacts that were housed in the chapel of the Herdewyke preceptory. As official documents in the twelfth century were frequently written in French, the term *objets sacrés* was the usual way of describing holy relics returned from the Crusades, often precious objects thought to have been associated with the Bible. Unfortunately, no specific details are given, other than the fact that pilgrims donated large sums of money to the preceptory when they visited the chapel to see these items. Nevertheless, chances are that these could well have been the same items discovered in the cave at Jebel Madhbah. The question is, what happened to them?

THE HERDEWYKE TREASURE

By the early 1300s, there were hundreds of Templar preceptories throughout Europe, and they had all become exceptionally wealthy. Although their riches were originally plundered from the Crusades, the Templars had amassed further wealth by leasing land and acting as some of the first bankers in Christian Europe. In the early fourteenth century, fearing their power and influence, the Pope ordered the Templar Order to be dissolved. In England, though, King Edward II had fallen out with the Pope and allowed the order to continue, for he enjoyed their financial support. However, in 1322, when they refused to continue financing the King, he ordered the Templars arrested and their property seized. Upon Ralph de Sudeley's death, the Herdewyke preceptory had been bequeathed to the Templar Order, and they were still in residence at the time of Edward's purge. Accordingly, their possessions were seized by the Crown – or at least *some* of them were, if a local legend is to be believed.

According to the Warwickshire historian William Dugdale in 1656, the Elizabethan explorer Sir Walter Raleigh visited Herdewyke in 1600 and was told a story about the Templars hiding treasure in the area. For some reason or other, Raleigh took it seriously and spent months looking for treasure. He persuaded his wealthy wife (Elizabeth Throckmorton, Maid of Honour to Queen Elizabeth I) to buy the Herdewyke estate and had a gang of men excavate the ruins of the Templar preceptory. Apparently, nothing was found. Nevertheless, could this legendary treasure have been the same relics that had once been housed in the Herdewyke chapel in Ralph de Sudeley's time?

The Herdewyke estate encompassed about nine square miles and included a region of low-lying land now called Temple Herdewyke (after the Templars who were once there) and an area of high land rising to over 1,000 feet to the immediate southeast of it called the Burton Dassett Hills. Temple Herdewyke and the Burton Dassett

Hills are now sparsely populated with a couple of tiny villages and a few small farms. Nothing remains of the medieval barracks or monastic buildings, but remarkably, the shell of the preceptory chapel still survives.

It was most unlikely that any of the Templars' sacred possessions had been hidden around or beneath the chapel. Not only was the entire area thoroughly dug by Raleigh's men, but it has more recently been excavated by archaeologists who have found nothing to indicate that anything was hidden there. Moreover, in the last couple of years, extensive digging has occurred for the foundations of the modern house. There was, however, another possibility. The relics could have been hidden in another church that the Templars had built nearby.

THE MYSTERIOUS MURALS

In 1327, five years after they had been outlawed and thrown from their land by Edward II, the Herdewyke Templars helped depose the King by aiding his queen, Isabella of France, who placed her young son Edward III on the throne as puppet King. In gratitude, the queen granted these Templars amnesty, although their lands were not returned. As their preceptory was now in the possession of rival landowners, the Templars raised the money to build a new church in the village of Burton Dasset, one and a half miles to the southeast, up on the Burton Dasset Hills. By this time purely a religious order (the Knights Templar had long ceased to be a military organization), the men required the church for their devotions. Sadly, these peaceful Templars did not survive long. In 1350, they and the entire Burton Dasset community were killed off by the Black Death.

Unlike the ruined chapel at Temple-Herdewyke, the medieval All Saints Church is not only well preserved, but is also still in use today. It stands on the hillside at the edge of the tiny hamlet of Burton Dasset, after which the upland is named.

If the Herdewyke Templars had possessed holy relics that they had managed to keep from the clutches of Edward II, then it would have made sense for them to hide these at the time of the Black Death. It was quite possible that, knowing their end was nigh, the Templars had hidden their precious possessions in the hope of preserving them intact. Indeed, many monastic communities are known to have done just this. A number of hoards of gold and silver vessels have been found by archaeologists over the years, believed to have been hidden by monks threatened by the plague. In fact, in the late 1800s, a local antiquarian, Jacob Cove-Jones, from the village of Loxley in Warwickshire, claimed that the Templars had actually left clues in the church to reveal the whereabouts of the legendary treasure.

During repairs to the Anglican parish church of the district building in 1890, the plaster was removed from the internal walls to

reveal some ancient decorations hidden for centuries on either side of the north transept window. They were crude depictions of two human figures wearing crowns, accompanied by a series of faded inscriptions written in Latin. As they dated from around 1350, the time of the Black Death, Jacob Cove-Jones was convinced that they held a coded message to lead to the hidden treasure.

He may have been onto something. The paintings depicted two crowned figures, one holding a severed head, the other a chalice. The angels on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant were said to have represented Archangels Michael and Gabriel, who themselves are often depicted as one with a severed head and the other with a chalice or water container. If the Templars' treasure had included the Ark of the Covenant, then these two figures may have been used as part of the code to reveal their whereabouts.

In fact, Jacob Cove-Jones had propounded more than just the belief that these paintings were clues to the whereabouts of the treasure; he also claimed to have cracked the code and knew where they were hidden.

How he solved the supposed code or where it led him, he refused to reveal. If there was a code in the murals, then Cove-Jones would have been in a better position to solve it in the late nineteenth century than someone today. Long neglected and damaged by the passage of time since they were uncovered in 1890, much of the accompanying Latin writing has crumbled away.

However, as the window flanked by the two figures that may have represented Michael and Gabriel faces out onto the Burton Dasset Hills, Graham Phillips could not help but wonder if the hills were somehow important. In the Middle Ages, when the murals were painted, the hills were known as the Phoenix Hills. In mythology, the phoenix was a firebird, and the hills were so named because of the beacon fires that were once lit atop them as signals of important national events or to convey messages in wartime. A stone structure called The Beacon still marks the spot where the huge bonfires were once lit, but nothing there seemed to provide any clue as to what Cove-Jones may have discovered.

Jacob Cove-Jones may not have told anyone what the purported clues had led him to discover, but he did leave what he claimed was his own coded message to lead others to the location. From what his descendants knew, he had found what he called "a discovery of

immense importance” and left it where it was and created his own code to its whereabouts, as he feared the murals in Burton Dassett Church would not survive for long now they had been exposed to the air. Why he didn't tell anyone what he had discovered is a mystery, but from what is known, he had been involved in a dispute with other local historians and held his tongue just to spite them.

The code had apparently been left in a stained-glass window designed on Cove-Jones's request by an artist friend named Bernard Lamplugh. The window was donated and installed in the tiny parish church in the nearby village of Langley. Over the years, many local people tried to solve the conundrum but apparently failed. In fact, most people consider that there was no coded message in the window at all and that Cove-Jones had made the whole thing up. It was something of a fad during the late nineteenth century for wealthy collectors of ancient relics to hide one or more of their prized possessions at the end of a trail of ciphered messages as a kind of personal epitaph set for future generations to decode. Indeed, he had investigated a code left in another stained-glass window himself, which led to a small onyx cup that the Victorian owner had believed was the original Holy Grail.

THE EPIPHANY CODE

The Epiphany is the twelfth night of Christmas, January 6, when the three wise men are said to have visited the baby Jesus. Called the Epiphany Window, the stained-glass scene showed the wise men with their gifts before the Christ Child in the Bethlehem stable, where the Bible says Jesus was born.

Eventually, Graham Phillips and the Russells concluded that if the window did hold a coded message to lead to “a discovery of immense importance,” as Cove-Jones claimed, then it had to have something to do with a star. According to the New Testament, a strange new star appeared in the sky at the time of Jesus’ birth. Somewhere to the far east of Judea, the three wise men believed that the star was a sign from God to reveal the birthplace of the Messiah. They travelled in the direction of the star until they reached Bethlehem. The story concerned a place being found by following a star. Could a star somehow be involved in leading to the whereabouts of the Templars’ treasures? In fact, the stained-glass window appeared to show two stars, one overlaid on the other.

If the theory was right, then the Templars’ treasure included the Ark of the Covenant, and there were two stars fundamentally associated with the Ark. These were the two tail stars of the Big Dipper, now called Benetnash and Mizar, which to the ancient Israelites represented Michael and Gabriel, the guardian angels depicted on the lid of the Ark. Indeed, this tied up with the figures portrayed in the murals on either side of the window in Burton Dassett Church. Gabriel was a bringer of enlightenment and God’s message, and was often depicted with a vessel containing the sacred water of God’s salvation; while Michael was the instrument of God’s wrath, often depicted with severed heads of the Lord’s enemies. One of the figures in the Burton Dassett murals held a chalice, and the other a severed head. Even though they were depicted as medieval kings, this was surely more than coincidence. Perhaps they represented the two archangels of the Ark. Maybe either or both of

the Big Dipper stars they were associated with somehow indicated the secret hiding place.

However, if Jacob Cove-Jones had used these stars to indicate a hiding place, one had to know where and when these stars could be observed. The positions of the stars change all the time, not only in relation to the rotation of the Earth, but also throughout the course of the year as Earth orbits the sun. If the treasure was hidden somewhere that was, for instance, indicated by the stars directly above it, they would need to know the precise time and day of the year to observe them. Furthermore, they would need to know where to observe the stars from, as they would appear to be over different locations depending on the viewing point.

There was a solution however. At the top of the Epiphany Window was the star, which guided the wise men to Bethlehem, and right next to it was a phoenix rising from flames – the very same creature after which the Burton Dasset Hills had originally been named. They realized that this must be significant, because the letters B and M were written in panels on either side of the phoenix. B and M may have been the initials of two of the wise men, Balthazar and Melchior, but they were also the initials of the two tail stars of the Big Dipper, Benetnash and Mizar. Could the location from which to observe these stars be the top of the Phoenix Hills?

The final question was *when* should they observe these stars? Ultimately, they decided that the answer lay in the name of the window and the event it depicted – the Epiphany, on the sixth of January. There was only one thing left to determine: at what time on that night should they observe the stars? Something in the window did provide a precise hour of the day. At the very top of the window, there was a cock, which in Christian tradition crowed at midnight to reveal to the wise men the precise whereabouts of the stable where Jesus had been born, once the star had led them to Bethlehem. If they were right, then midnight on January 6 appeared to be the precise time they needed to be atop the Burton Dasset Hills.

GUIDING STARS

The moment of midnight arrived. The two tail stars, Benetnash and Mizar, were pointing almost vertically downward toward the southern end of a hill that stood out in the moonlight as a stark silhouette on the far horizon.

The hill was called Napton Hill, some fourteen miles to the northeast. To its immediate south was the location to which the stars had pointed, a tiny village called Chapel Green.

At Chapel Green, in the Epiphany Window, the star is shown hanging over what appears to be a chapel surrounded by a defensive wall and a red brick, arched entrance. This was presumably meant to represent Bethlehem, but could it also represent what they were looking for? If Jacob Cove-Jones was to be believed, the place they were seeking was the hiding place of the Templars' relics. As these items were considered holy, the likelihood was they would have been hidden on hallowed ground. Chapel Green was named after a medieval chapel that once stood there, but all that remains of it now is a holy well that stands beside a road at the foot of the hill. In fact, in the 1800s, the original shrine that marked the spot was replaced by a drinking fountain that would have been there in Cove-Jones's time. This, they decided, was the best bet.

Arriving at the spot, a drinking fountain was discovered; overgrown in the hedges of a roadside verge. Had Jacob Cove-Jones' code been cracked? It was a rectangular structure about three feet high, four feet wide, and a foot thick, with a rounded arched niche in which a tap for the spring water had obviously once been set. Built from red brick, it reminded them of the red brick arch in the Epiphany Window. The star – or perhaps two stars – in the widow design was directly over a rounded brick arch that was remarkably similar to what was found.

WRITTEN IN STONE

The area around the water fountain was later surveyed by archaeologists using geophysics equipment to detect what was under the ground. Unfortunately, nothing of interest was found. However, it was ultimately discovered that in the 1940s, the entire area around the fountain was dug up to widen the lane and to build a number of houses along the new road. The records showed that the excavated rubble had been used to divert a stream in a nearby wood, and this area was also investigated by the geophysics team. Although there was no evidence of any gold objects like the Ark of the Covenant, one thing was found that must have originally come from the ground excavated beside the water fountain. In the banks of the stream, a flat stone slab was discovered, about an inch thick, a foot and a half long, and a foot wide. Made of sandstone, it was inscribed with what appeared to be thirteen separate symbols, cut into the stone to a depth of about a quarter of an inch. The slab had clearly been broken off from a longer piece, as one end was irregular and jagged. The other end, however, was smoother and had been deliberately rounded at the corners.

The slab was taken to the British Museum in London, which boasts England's best facilities for identifying ancient artefacts. However, as the stone was not made from organic matter, it could not be carbon-dated, and as it had been removed from its original location and used for landfill, its age could not be determined by the usual archaeological methods. How long ago the slab was shaped and inscribed was also a mystery, as the symbols carved into it could not be identified. They appeared to match no form of ancient or modern writing. In fact, they could not be matched with any known alphabet or symbol system on the museum's massive database.

If the Templars' treasures had been hidden in Chapel Green, they had long since been removed, either by Jacob Cove-Jones or someone else. The stone slab, however, may have been overlooked. It is possible that it may have been the most important artefact of all.

The sandstone from which it was cut was identified as eremite sandstone – precisely the same sort of rock from which Jebel Madhbah is formed. This may be the true Mount Sinai, and the Book of Exodus states that the stone slabs from which the Ten Commandments were made came from that very mountain (Exodus 34:4). Could this stone slab have been one or part of one of the two tablets that the Bible says were inscribed by God, given to Moses, and kept in the Ark of the Covenant?

THE DAILY TRIBUNAL
MORNING EDITION

Further to the findings in the massive underground tunnels near the surrounding area of the Coliseum in Rome, the excavations and restoration of the Coliseum and nearby structures along St. Jiovani have dug up a maze of more tunnels that may lead miles across the streets of Rome. It is believed that these tunnels were used by ancient Romans to lead gladiators into the Coliseum.

In one tunnel out of what experts believe to be of six, a wall made of blue stone had been constructed, blocking any further access through the tunnel. In addition, there seem to be inscriptions on the stones, though most of the writing has been worn away. Experts are trying to decipher what can be comprehended.

From the Templars in England to the Roman warriors in Rome. What else will be unearthed?

THE ORDER OF ST. AUGUSTUS

THE SECRET SOCIETY OF THE TEMPLARS

“For centuries this has been going on; people obsessed with wanting to know the truth, to find the truth.”

“And aren’t we part of that obsessive community?” Gerard asked, looking sternly at his superior.

“We may be, but we have a job to do. We are an order, and we do what we must.”

“There still isn’t any proof that the four books exist. The treasure itself is still yet to be found.”

“You are forgetting that we have a very good source amongst us.”

“And what we are doing is against all that we believe.” There was a hint of concern in his voice, and as much as he tried to cover it up, the more he spoke, the more it became certain that his feelings toward the whole situation were beginning to scare him. “Francis, we are a religious order, and to communicate with the damned is unforgivable. What if the rest of the order finds out what you have planned?”

Francis only smiled, and it was a smile that he knew would have chilled Gerard to the core. He slowly turned to face his brother, quick to wipe the grin off his face. “Listen to me. Yes, for years we have kept an eye out for any mention of treasures. We followed men across the globe in hopes that what they had found was what we hoped it would be, but to our disappointment, it was not the books. All those stories of the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant! How many of our people have searched and found nothing? And what was believed to have been found is now in the hands of government officials.”

Francis’ voice took on a higher tone. “We are the order! My father, my father’s father, and his father were part of this sect. They were the Templars, and what is buried out there belongs here! Those people have no right to it!” The old man began shaking, and quickly

Gerard dashed to the pitcher of water that sat at the corner of the large desk and poured him a glass.

He watched Francis gulp the liquid, thinking to himself how stupid he had been for sticking around. *Brother indeed! But definitely not by blood!* He became suspicious with Francis the day he heard him speak to some stranger in the rectory, discussing the possibility of retrieving the four *Books of Secrets*. The odd thing about the conversation was that when he entered the room, there was nobody else with Francis. Even stranger was the fact that he had positioned himself within a circle drawn on the wooden floor. A sudden wind blew around them then, and the glass on the window overlooking the gardens suddenly shattered into pieces.

“You fool!” Gerard remembered him screaming. “Stay where you are and don’t move.” He watched the old man finish his ritual, then casually sat in his chair. Francis began to tell him everything about the books and how he would find them.

Gerard had only read about such books belonging to the Templars and didn’t think much of the fact that they could exist. Like Francis’ father and his father, there was no link to his heritage with the Templars, but considering the fact that the man was senile, old, stubborn, and obsessed, to him anything was believable.

But the man had occult powers, and strong ones at that. In the years that followed, he had witnessed a number of strange and eerie accounts where Francis would call upon the dead in order to find answers. There would be gusts of wind blowing around him; unpleasant odours that suddenly came and went; objects levitating and, at one time, he practically changed his appearance!

Gerard learned these rituals had been going on for many years before he joined the order. The rites were conducted to find the real Templar treasure that to this very moment had not been found by anyone. The real treasure did contain a book and a sword amongst hoards of gold coins and jewels. The only problem was, only one of the chosen four could find this treasure.

This, he found out through his spirit guide, an entity which Gerard didn’t like. Spirits had a way of turning themselves onto you, no matter how much you were able to control them. This one seemed quite eager to lend a helping hand, but no spirit ever did anything free. He feared most of all that Francis had made a pact.

So far, the information Francis carried with him was still not enough to find the books. The puzzle still had unfinished pieces. Only one out of the four was secretly given the task, but the whole process was way too slow for Francis' liking. Samael did have some sort of vendetta; hence his reason for being so cooperative. Gerard thought it odd that Francis didn't pick this up in the beginning, and such an advanced magician he claimed to be! And this vendetta? Well, it went back thousands of years to when Samael was held in contempt and cast to Earth as a fallen angel, the gates of heaven closing on him forever. He had become the right shoulder within mankind, tempting the evil ways, causing the destruction of man. *He* was the one people called Satan.

It was humorous to see how over generations, such stories became part of everyday life. Catholics who had believed in such tales spun their yarns to their children in order to convince them to follow the path of righteousness, quite possibly scaring the living daylights out of them. The story told to children by so many was that Samael was an accuser, seducer, and a destroyer. He was regarded as both good and evil, and in some lore was identified as the chief of devils and the Angel of Death. *The Book Of Secrets* is believed to tell the story of Samael; the Prince of demons and a magician, and how he became what he is.

Whether all this was a myth or not, Gerard certainly believed that such mischievous sprites did exist. What he heard and saw was real, and he still couldn't control that icy feeling throughout his body whenever he heard that chilling voice speak.

The question in Gerard's mind was, what was the connection between Samael and the Templars' treasure? He later found out that Samael and Michael (the protector) were always together. They represented good and evil, and both were angels to one of the Knights who carried the Cardinal book. Samael caused havoc within the Knight's mind, seducing his thoughts and conveying emotions of unbelievable heights.

It was said that Samael was the one who brought on the deaths of the Templars by causing them to perform homosexual acts within communities, which regarded them as distasteful and illegal, requiring by law a punishment of instant death. It is also believed that Samael instigated the death of all those witches during the European witch-hunts where countless innocent people were hanged

or burned. Matthew Hopkins, a witch hunter, had overheard a conversation between some women that they were meeting up with Satan, and his job as a witch hunter began.

Was Matthew Hopkins correct in stating that these people were witches, or was Samael involved in these extreme executions of innocent people? Did Samael corrupt Hopkins to make him believe that these people were witches?

Gerard never believed that such an entity could exist, but he had seen him, just like he had seen an angel when he was young. It was a manifestation so real that he could have been mistaken for a real man. His features were striking; a suave type of person with an assertive look and a style in him so confident that one would think twice before any accusations were made. His eyes were deep set, ocean blue, and magnetic. He remembered staring into those hypnotic eyes and feeling himself being slowly pulled in, his heart racing and his breathing shortening, yet he longed to be in them. He wanted Samael to take him, and he didn't care where.

Francis had pulled him out of the trance, telling Samael that Gerard was not part of the deal. And now, he remembered the agreement. Looking back at the ancient one, he noticed a perfect smile forming on his face. Though the smile was alluring, there was also something cold and disturbing about it.

The deal? A modern tale of Faust. Francis had made a pact with Samael. The demon would assist and guide him to the treasure and in return, Francis would give up his soul.

"These spirits may be cunning, but they are not wise," Francis had told him, and left it at that. There was no further mention of the treasure, Samael, or the Templars until recently when Michael appeared, which meant the time was drawing near.

And here he was, facing the old man, watching him gulp down water like a thirsty child, the liquid dripping between his lips. He sat the glass down with a *thump*, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "The archangel is here."

"But we don't know what he looks like."

"We don't need to. Our guide will be doing the work for us."

"Still, I can't see the point of going through all this only to get your hands on one book when there are four. Francis, you need all four books."

"And I shall have them. I have magic on my side, remember."

“That is true, Francis, but followers of the black arts always end up dead. It seems that’s the story anyway. As a man of God, I think this is not the way one is supposed to go about it.”

“Me, a man of God?” He laughed a shrill laugh that made Gerard’s blood turn cold. “We are an order, not some religious sect that worships faith.”

“But the Pope, Francis. He knows of the books, and isn’t it why he came to you to assist in locating them? Are not these books, if ever found and if they do exist, to belong to the church?”

“You have much to learn, Gerard. Now leave me.”

Gerard did as he was told, the hatred rising, the disgust overwhelming him. If only the church knew what this evil mind was planning – but then was not the church a part of this diabolical plan in the first place? They must have known of Francis’ esoteric powers, and of course, for the books to be found, the aid of a heavenly being was required.

He started to walk down the corridor when he heard a shrill cry from behind the door – a cold, icy scream that made him stop in his tracks. Slowly, he turned to face the door, feeling the hair on his arms and neck rise. Without any further hesitation, he ran to his quarters.

RΘMIA

“Can we trust him with this mission? You know he is not one to abide by the rules.”

The Pope thought for a moment, his weary eyes looking to the ceiling and then down to his fingers, which were pointed to a glass box containing an old book. Beside it were three spaces reserved for the remaining texts. A smile surfaced as he struggled to get out of his chair. With the aid of his assistants, he was on his feet and slowly stumbled to the glass cabinet.

“Do you realize what this means?” He patted the cabinet. “The first texts ever written, before the Bible, before the Koran, before any words written on paper. These are words instructed by God and written by angels. The power that exists inside those pages is beyond imagination.”

“But your Excellency, a man like Francis should not be one to get his hands on them. He is ruthless, evil, and will ensure he keeps these texts for himself.”

“Yes, yes, I know!” His voice showed a little impatience, for he was tired of hearing about this monstrous being. Of course he knew the man and how his mind worked. After all, the Order of St. Augustus was always in search of religious artefacts, claiming that any religious relic was somehow their rightful property. However, he had to admit, Francis was a powerful man. He had his contacts, both beings and non-beings, and though the Church forbade the practice of such black magic, the man was smart. He needed such a person to retrieve the rest of the texts. And yes, Francis would keep these books for his own personal glory and would kill to get his hands on them. But little did he know, one was already resting here.

“We will deal with him when the time comes,” the Pope spoke quietly and ushered one of his assistant to help him back to his chair. As he made himself comfortable, he turned to Andreas. “Do you realize what troubles and the amount of time we went through to get this one text and the people who sacrificed their lives to get it?”

“Yes, your Excellency. But my question is, how many more lives are we going to see sacrificed before the deed is done?”

“That is why our friend Francis will take hold of the reigns to retrieve these texts. The Church’s hands are clean.”

“But you know of the prophecy. What of the other three innocents?”

“Unfortunately, their fate has been written.” He nodded toward the text in the cabinet. “He was my nephew, a well educated archaeologist. Here in Roma, he was well liked by his students and by his family and friends. Unfortunately, he thought he was going insane with all the dreams, the lights, and the strangers he was seeing. It was getting to be too much for him, but he managed to find the text buried eight kilometres from the Church of Divine in a small hollow. They were digging for days until they came across a structure, something like a cave, but found nothing. My nephew was persistent. He was not going to give up. He kept digging until he struck a wall, and there it was – one of the books, along with the sword and its corresponding jewel! I remember him telling me when he gave me the book how he felt strange once he opened it, though for the life of him, he could not quite grasp what language the book was written in, even as educated as he was.

“He became obsessed and swore that someone was after him, becoming a recluse, until one day he called me and said that someone kept appearing inside his house. He would see a blue light, then an image or some shadow being conjured. They found him the next morning hanging in the kitchen.”

“I am sorry to hear this, but I am still concerned with this whole affair. You know you can be an accessory if the events turn sour, and you don’t know what Francis will do either. Such a mind can turn against you if it has not already. I dread to think what plans he has.”

“And I am ready for him.”

“How?”

“You forget what power the Church has.” The Pope smiled, turning away from Andreas as he felt the smile would have been too sinister for any religious man to see. Quickly, he wiped it away and turned back to Andreas.

“There is something you need to do for me. As you are well aware, these texts are written in a language that not many people on this Earth can decipher. Also, only one of the books is the real text.

The person who can interpret these words will be the first-ever person to read the true scripture God gave the angels to write. It predates the Bible, powerful in words and magical.

“I want you to go to Napoli and meet a friend of mine. All you need to do is give him this envelope.” He handed Andreas a bulky yellow sachet. “I give you a warning: do not ask questions and do not hesitate in any way. Just give this person the envelope and leave. The address where you are to meet is on the front.”

“Why do I feel nervous about this, your Excellency?”

“Because you should. You will be associating with the mafia.”

* * *

So, we were in Rome, and I still couldn't understand why the hell I was there. My career in the Fire Brigade was on hold. In fact, I called them to ask for emergency leave, telling them I had some important issues to attend to. Of course, this was a lie, but until I could find out my purpose in life, I was certainly not going to be settled.

And I still had some uncertainty about this story of a supposed magical book that according to ancient texts existed in our world. *And I am going to find it? I don't think so.* But Mary seemed determined to make the trip. She was obsessed with it, and knowing how stubborn she could get, there was no way I could disagree with her.

As for Michael, it had been a number of days since I saw him last, and I seemed to feel lost without him. When one starts to rely on someone, it gets hard to live without them, but I could feel his presence. I could smell him, sense him, and sometimes even feel his breath on me. His energy was inside me, and I knew that it was him who was keeping me from going insane with this whole ordeal, giving me the strength to move on.

The other scary part in my life was the knowledge that I had been acquiring. When I woke up, the first thing that entered my mind was the familiarity of incidents that happened, hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago. Like a television show, images appeared in my mind, as if I was there and the experiences had actually happened. I began to think, *Maybe I am a descendant? Who knows?*

Reincarnated? Maybe not. What am I to believe? I could not answer those questions.

I did know, however, how much my heart ached for Michael, how much I wanted him. I couldn't believe a human being could have such strong feelings – emotions so strong that they seemed to take over my whole mind. I thought of him every minute of the day, and there were times when I felt lost not knowing where he was, when I did not hear from him, when he was not beside me.

And right at this moment, I need him.

Mary and I stood outside our hotel on Via Ostiense, only a five-minute walk from the well-known Pyramid zone. It was also close to the Coliseum, an easy twenty-minute by foot journey. I searched the surroundings hoping I would catch sight of Michael, but there was no trace of him.

I tried hard to get him out of my mind and looked at Mary, who was itching to get to the newfound tunnels near the Coliseum. I stared at the many apartment buildings, which held an antique sort of charm, for they were nowhere near modern. While some had a paint job, the designs were still the same as they were hundreds of years ago. The train lines were also a sight to behold – not just one rail line, but eight separate lines that ran through the middle of the city. As rundown as it was, with vandalized trains running across residential areas, it was part of the lifestyle, and I supposed the residents had grown accustomed to it.

I noticed that it was a little difficult for us to cross the Roman roads. It seemed that pedestrians did not have the right to cross, even on designated pedestrian crossings, but they could walk anywhere they wanted, as long as they gave way to the cars. And the drivers didn't seem to have to follow any traffic laws at all. They cut in whenever they wanted, ignoring the white line that divided the road, and driving in whichever lane they chose – sometimes even both lanes if they felt like it! The traffic lights were just as confusing. Did red mean stop or move faster so you can be the first to cross? And who knows what a green light meant.

I smiled as I watched this chaos, and in five minutes, a number of road laws had been broken. The traffic cops back home would have had a field day writing tickets, but Rome was a world all of its own.

Twenty minutes seemed like only five when we arrived at the magnificent *artefact*. I call it this because its massive structure and the aging stone is, in itself, a monument of a priceless structure. I have seen the pictures and what it looks like on television, but there it was, right there in front of me. It was such a monstrous sculpture, so beautiful and historic – a perfect circle of massive circumference. It seemed impossible that it was built by human hands.

Mary and I decided to do the tourist thing and paid to enter the Coliseum. There I was marvelling at its beauty and in awe of the realization that my feet were standing on soiled ground dating so far, far back in history. When I closed my eyes and blocked out the hundreds of tourists, I could almost hear the cheers of the Romans and feel the trepidation the gladiators must have felt as they walked out to the centre to meet their fate. The soil beneath me seemed to unearth the many men who fought to their deaths, blood splattered on the ground now touched by my own two feet. And again, the cheers rang out as the prized fighter bowed to the crowd and proudly walked off thanking the Lord that he has survived another day. The Coliseum is not a place to visit and say, “There, I have seen it.” Instead, time needs to be spent here to feel its exciting vibration of times long past, enjoy the moment of its history, and step back into the more ancient days of man.

I felt the history inside me, and as strange as it was, I also felt that I had been here before. I froze where I stood. I could feel Mary’s hand tugging at me asking if I was okay, but I couldn’t answer her as I felt the history of this structure embalm me with its sadness.

“In those times, they were games, and the enjoyment of seeing men being brutally killed was a wonderful sport for the people.”

It was Michael speaking to me, and his voice was a comfort to my whole being. “Why does it seem so real to me?” I asked and knew that the question was a thought not spoken out loud.

“Just let your senses guide you. Feel the history. Know it and be part of it.”

It was then I caught an image of a Knight in white walking through darkness along a passage. He didn’t seem too concerned about where he was heading. The darkness was second nature to him, and he knew exactly where it led.

“They were here,” I found myself saying as I awoke from my hypnotic state.

“Who? Who was here?” Mary asked, still tugging at me.

“The Templars. Mary, I saw one of them.”

“What do you mean you *saw* one of them?”

“I don’t know. I suddenly had an image of one of them in the tunnel.”

To my surprise, Mary jumped in the air with squealing delight. “We can do this, I know we can!” Then, she became more serious and asked, “And when did you start having visions?”

I looked at her and smiled. “I’ve been having them for some time.”

“Since Michael came into your life, no doubt,” she answered. “I’d like to meet him one day, but something tells me that will be impossible.” She grabbed my hand and led me out of the Coliseum and toward Via Saint Giovanni where the tunnels were found.

My question to Mary was what was going to be our next move. Not only were there hundreds of people surrounding the mouth of the tunnels, but also many police guarding the entrance and other officials in the area, who would make it impossible for us to do anything.

I then noticed Samael in the crowd. I didn’t know it was him, but I had seen his face a few times and now began to wonder if he was like Michael. I turned to Mary and didn’t have to ask if she could see him. She was staring directly at him.

“You can see him?” I said, looking back at Samael.

“Yes, I see him. He is the same man who came to me in the library after you left. He said something about a balance.”

Samael pointed toward the entrance of the tunnel, a wide grin covering his face. Then, as a blue light engulfed him, he shimmered away.

Mary grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed tightly. “You know something? I am starting to freak out!”

* * *

“They have arrived, and she is more determined for the prize than he is.”

“And what about Michael?”

“What about Michael?” Samael retorted.

Francis was becoming a little impatient, walking around the protective circle making sure he didn't break the seal. "I don't know. History has always shown that you people end up in the gutter."

"Must you pace within that blasted circle? You must know by now that your magic is really no good on me. Magic is for the lower spirits, the ones you are able to control. As for me, it does you no good."

"Step out and risk myself against you? I don't think so. I will take my chances that this circle will hold."

"If I wanted to harm you, I could do it anytime I want." Samael removed himself from the chair and stepped toward the circle. "You call yourself a magician of the occult. Real magicians do not require protective elements. They only need to use their minds. To me, you are no magician."

"I summoned you, didn't I?"

He let out roar of laughter and without any warning stepped into the circle and pushed Francis out. The force made Francis fall to the floor and he hit his head on the side of the writing desk.

"You did not summon me. I came to you, you old fool."

Francis was quickly on his feet and grabbed a vial of holy water. Trembling, he twisted the cap off, his hand shaking as he showed the vial to Samael. "I command you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to vanish from God's Earth." He tossed it toward Samael, but his aim was far off.

"You disgust me, Francis. How dare you mention the name of Jesus! You do not believe in that faith. It is ironic how mortals turn to God when they are scared. Hypocrites! And a man like you whose soul is black? The gates of heaven will never open for you, yet here you are asking for the Lord's aid only after your weak circle has failed you."

"You want my soul, take it! TAKE IT!" Francis screamed and quickly crawled to the door. Upon placing his hands on the doorknob, he found it impossible to turn. "Gerard! Gerard!"

"I pity you. You ask me to take your soul, and you cry for help. You are a fake, Francis, and I don't think your soul is worth taking." Samael was back in the chair, legs crossed and smiling. "Now, come and sit down. We have things to discuss. After all, as a fallen angel, I too have a job to do. I have been doing my part, now what is your story?"

Francis stumbled to the chair behind his desk and nervously reached for the decanter filled with wine. He filled the glass halfway, spilling some of the liquid onto the desk. Still shaking, he placed the glass to his lips and emptied it in one gulp.

“I know our famous Pope is up to something. He wants those books as much as I do, but he thinks I am working for him. I don’t know if he knows about Michael’s boy.”

“You do realize that there are four books, but only one is real?”

“Yes I do.”

“So you must be patient. Knowing your feeble mind, you will end up just like that weakling of a nephew of his.” Samael shook his head in slight disgust. “Poor boy just went crazy. Couldn’t handle it.” He raised his eyebrows to Francis; that wicked smile reappearing. “It happens.”

“Do you think the book is in those tunnels in Rome?”

“Not up to me to say. I am only a guide.”

“But you know.”

“I know many things.”

“Then there is no need for me to tell you any further plans since you are full of knowledge.” Francis poured himself another glass of wine, this time only sipping at it.

Samael was on his feet in a flash. He stepped over to the desk and traced the shape of heart with his finger on the polished oak. “Tread carefully.” It was all he said before a blue flame engulfed him and he disappeared.

At the same time, the heart he drew also burst into flames.

* * *

Andreas was not used to wearing civilian clothes and felt uncomfortable in jeans and a jacket. He must have been seventeen the last time he wore something like this, and after thirty years of wearing robes, he certainly was not content with the attire.

He never enjoyed travelling to Naples by train, which took two hours. The scenery wasn’t as nice as when travelling north, but still, the surrounding mountains and their snow peaks were quite lovely to look at, and the journey itself was pleasant. He arrived at Napoli Central in wet weather, and the streets were chaotic. He found that Naples was a very busy city, and if there were ever any comparison

regarding the rudeness of people in Roma and Napoli, Napoli would most definitely win.

He did respect the city itself after its historic tragedy. To see such a historical city ruined by Mount Vesuvius was extraordinary, and there was the destructive mountain looking down onto the overpopulated metropolis not far away from the ruins of Pompeii.

Pompeii rises on a plateau of Vesuvian lava overlooking the Sarno River, once a busy port. The origins of Pompeii have never been accurate, but there are reports that the first walls were built toward the end of the seventh and the first half of the sixth century BC.

Civilization was mixed: Etruscan and Greek elements led to the city's development. Toward the end of the fifth century BC, the Samnite Tribe came down from the mountains of Irpinia and Samnio and spread across the land in what is known as Campania. As the years passed, more and more people inhabited the city and spread through Southern Italy. In around 343 BC, Pompeii entered the Roman political organization. In 90 to 89 BC it rebelled, as they demanded equal social and political respect from Rome. The city was placed under siege, and once it surrendered, it became a Roman colony with the name Cornelia Veneria.

After the city was "downgraded" to a Roman colony, Pompeii was enhanced with private and public buildings.

A violent earthquake struck the entire area in 62 AD. Reconstruction began straight away in Pompeii, but the extent of the damage was so great that repairs took a very long time, hampered by many aftershocks.

Seventeen years later, when Vesuvius suddenly erupted on August 24, AD79, the entire city was buried under ash and rock. Construction was still underway, and the earlier earthquake had already destroyed most of the buildings.

Pompeii was rediscovered in the sixteenth century, but the exploration of the city did not commence until 1748.

His very first trip to Pompeii as a school student was many years ago, but it embedded a fascination in his mind that existed to this very day. Andreas was also sad to see that the city of Naples was not a clean one; there were no trash collectors, and mountains of

overstuffed rubbish bags were strewn about the streets. The problem had started a while before, and unfortunately, there had been no resolution. People went about their business as if they had no knowledge that disease would soon start spreading from the garbage pile-up.

How he wished he were back in Roma. The thought of seeing the Cardova made him shiver, but it was the Pope's request, and he had to obey, even though his innermost feelings told him that this was not an innocent thing to do. He still could not grasp the idea that the Pope had connections with the Cardova. Even though he knew of this association many years before, he had never actually seen both parties together. Then again, it was not something that could be broadcasted.

He quickly hailed a cab, read the address to the driver, and was on his way. The rain caused a lot of traffic, and it took them almost twenty minutes to escape the main road that led outside the city centre. Once away from the bustling traffic, it only took another ten minutes to arrive at a block of apartments where the trash had become a monument for the residents in the area.

Paying the driver, he stepped out of the taxi and looked up at the fourth floor. He did not like this, and his stomach started rumbling. This was not something he vowed to do when he took the oath to enter the Church, and standing here slightly distressed, torn between what was right and wrong, going against the man he worked for or his God, his fear was growing as he now thought about what was in the package he held.

Andreas didn't even realize the rain had now soaked his clothes, and as panic started to grip him, he ran for shelter. Without any thought, he ripped the envelope open and took out its contents. A letter was addressed to the receiver; only a few sentences. There was a photograph of the man to be targeted and a thick envelope containing money – quite a bit, from the look of it. He placed everything back inside and finally realized what he had done.

Above him on the fourth floor, the curtains drew to a close. A number was entered into a mobile phone, and as it rang, the front door of the apartment opened, then closed. Words were exchanged briefly. The down button for the elevator was pressed. He waited patiently as the lift arrived.

Outside, Andreas was unsure of what action to take as the rain poured heavily down. He knew he couldn't do this, as hell would be his punishment. He would be part of a conspiracy. He cursed himself for not asking the taxi driver to wait, but the thought had never occurred to him. He made his way into the rain and toward the main street, hoping to hail another cab as quickly as he had summoned the first.

Behind him, silent footsteps kept at a close distance.

Andreas stopped, his face wet and clothes now fully drenched. The envelope was nearly soaked through, the smeared ink on the letter becoming impossible to read. There were no taxis in sight. He finally saw the metro and made a dash toward it; relieved he would be back under cover from the rain.

The footsteps quickened in order to keep up, though they did not need to hurry as the pursuant was now resting and looking through the envelope again. The contents were being torn and thrown into a local trash bin. Only the small package of money remained securely in his right hand.

Andreas looked up toward Mount Vesuvius. The volcano was still active, and deep beneath its dark centre, activity had been measured, though not enough to cause any major destruction. It had been said that it could be hundreds of years before Vesuvius once again let out its fierce roar on the city of Naples.

He laughed nervously at this thought, something unexpected that came to his mind. He suddenly turned to his left to see a man standing beside him, also dripping wet. He looked a little fed up with the weather, and Andreas didn't blame him.

"It is strange to have this much rain at this time of year," the man said.

Andreas smiled politely and agreed. He stared back at the volcano with a certain respect, knowing what a catastrophe it could cause.

The man followed his gaze and nodded. "At night, I go out onto the fourth floor balcony, and there it is, staring at me. I stare back, wondering if Vesuvius has the patience to wait before it erupts again, or maybe it has waited long enough, and soon the explosion of gases, lava, and heat will thunder from its mouth and howl its anger toward Napoli."

Andreas looked at the man. It was a scary thought, and it was his last before the silencer shot a bullet through his back and heart, his body falling to the ground as his eyes stared up at Vesuvius.

The stranger had already left the scene with the money by the time somebody screamed for help.

* * *

The Pope knelt in front of the cross, his prayers going out for those that had lost their lives – one life in particular. He was warned. It was not his doing that Andreas disobeyed his specific orders. Now, he needed to find another to stand by his side, but only after the books had been found. It would be unwise of him to get others involved.

He prayed for the man's soul and prayed for himself, asking God for forgiveness. The sound of laughter echoed in his mind, and he quickly turned around, though nobody was in sight.

"Why doesn't your God speak to you like I do?"

The Pope was quickly on his feet. "Who is in here?"

"I don't need to be physically seen. You wish for me to forgive your sins?" The roar of laughter was so piercing the Pope covered his ears. *"Yes, my son, I forgive you."* The voice grew louder, *"YES, YES, I FORGIVE YOU!"*

It all ended suddenly, his white robe splattered with blood that now dripped from his nose. He fell on his knees toward the cross and gazed upon the face of the Lord. "Am I worthy? No, I am not. If the devil has spoken to me, there is no justification for my forgiveness."

Slowly and in shame, he made his way to his room as the six o'clock evening bells chimed.

* * *

"Michael, we can't just go into those tunnels without anybody seeing us. There are police surrounding the area." Karl was a little restless, pacing the room. Mary had just entered the shower when Michael appeared, and that, too, seemed to annoy him. He turned to face Michael and said, "Why is it you only appear to me? When we met at the café, you appeared to everyone."

Michael only smiled. He stepped in front of Karl and placed his hands on his shoulders. "It is not easy being who I am, and things happen because they have to happen. Remember, you called me, and I came. I came to you because you wanted me to, and I came to you because of your calling. Coincidence? No. It is up to you to believe what is to be real." He kissed his forehead with affection. "I do very much want you, to be with you, but in reality, it is not so."

"And how much time is there before I stop seeing you?"

The answer did not come, a tender kiss the only response. "Samael was at the excavations. You saw him?"

"Yes, and so did Mary. She said he appeared to her at the library as well."

"That is no good."

"What do you mean no good?" There was concern in Karl's voice.

"Samael controls the balance. He is good, and he is evil. He will help in order to retrieve the balance. What is good, he will turn bad. For centuries, he has been longing for souls and never succeeded, and the ones he has tried to harvest, the accomplishment was never successful. His main task is to keep the balance between good and evil, and that is why he is here."

"I still don't understand. What he has got to do with Mary?"

"Samael can also control destiny. He wants her."

"No! That is just ridiculous!" Karl was flabbergasted "Mary is nothing but an innocent and sweet person. She would not harm anyone."

"There have been many innocents who have died."

"So are you saying she is going to die?"

"No. All I am saying is that we can't control destiny."

Karl's voice was slowly rising to a pitch. "Michael, this is pathetic. I don't believe I am hearing this."

"You, of all people, should believe in this. Am I only a figment of your imagination? What is happening now, is it all in your mind? You, too, can prevent destiny. What you see and what you hear are clues to events that will happen in the future. If Mary does come across danger, it can be prevented."

"Shit, shit, shit," Karl repeated and was back to pacing the room. "She can't enter those tunnels."

"The call is yours."

He faced Michael a little puzzled. "Is that why he pointed to the tunnels? Not for the books, but to lure us in?"

"Remember the balance. One finds the book, and the other is sacrificed."

"How many have died trying to find these books?"

"There have been a few. Only one book so far has been found, and it is being held at the Vatican. The Pope's nephew found the book, but it was one of the false writings. He went mad and killed himself. He was not a strong-willed man. He could not cope with everything that was happening around him."

"So there are others who know of the existence of these books?"

"Certainly. The Pope wants them, and he has a good reason to want them. After all, they are religious artefacts."

"And who else?" Karl raised his eyebrows, but for some reason, the answer was already in his head. "People who will stop at nothing to get to them."

"They are an order. There is one who has been obsessed with the books for many years, and yes, he will do anything to have them."

"And the police?"

"You are in Roma," Michael chuckled. "Think wisely, and I am sure you will get through this."

As soon as the bathroom door opened, Michael vanished. Mary held on to the towel wrapped around her and with a smile said, "He was here, wasn't he?"

Karl nodded.

"You should have kept your voices down if you didn't want me to hear what was being said."

"What did you hear?" Karl asked curiously, but he knew she must have heard all of it – or at least most of it.

"I believe in all of the occult: angels, demons, black magic, and so forth. I also believe in destiny. If something happens to me, so be it!" She bent over beside the bed and dragged her suitcase out, unlatching the two fasteners. Her towel dropped, revealing her breasts, and she quickly looked up to see Karl's head turn the other way.

"I don't think these are of any interest to you," she giggled and rummaged to find her eveningwear. "Now, as I was saying, all I heard was your voice, and I felt your concern. If I am going to die, at least I know where."

“I’m not letting you go into those tunnels.”

“You know what I think?” She moved close to him and placed a finger on each side of his temple, her breast pushing onto his chest. “Inside this head there is a force that can control this so-called balance. I think you can do it! You can show that evil bastard that you, too, can play his game. You can do it, Karl; I know you can. You can stop whatever it is from happening.”

“But how?”

She tapped his temples. “It’s in there. You are a Wiccan! Start believing. Use what you know. Don’t wait for it to come to you – bring it out and use it. You felt and saw the history today. That is more than enough to make you believe you have some power.”

“And what happens if it’s too late for you?”

She tenderly kissed his lips. “I believe in you. Start believing in yourself.” She finished getting dressed and then applied some makeup.

Karl shook his head and smiled. “Makeup? What the hell for?”

“You never know. I may end up meeting my own angel.”

* * *

Gerard stood looking at Francis. Something had happened. He could read the expression. The man’s paces were hurried, and the inaudible words that he muttered proved that there was concern. He dared not to speak first and wisely waited until he was spoken to.

Francis’ mind was a jumble. How could this all go wrong? He had experts at the site, archaeologists whom he paid plenty of money to find and retrieve, if possible, any of the hidden books. But, there were interferences, and why hadn’t he seen this coming? He felt like a fool for thinking he could trust Samael. And now the Pope was suddenly afflicted with some sickness, bedridden with no further explanation. Then, there were the two meddling pests.

“Damn all this!” he screamed.

Gerard stepped back at the sudden outburst. Still, he kept silent.

“We are going to Rome. I need to find out what is happening.”

“But, sir, who will take charge here?”

He shrugged. “You think I care about this order? For years, all I wanted was to find those books. That was my goal, and here I am so

close to finding them, and things start to fall apart. I will not let this happen!”

Gerard took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t go with you. I don’t want any part of this.”

Francis stared at him with a terrifying expression. Gerard backed away toward the door, but not quick enough, for Francis was now towering over him, gripping his shirt and pulling him closer to his face, boring holes of hatred in the man with his eyes.

“You have no choice,” Francis said slowly, making each word clear for Gerard to understand.

“Do you really need him? He’ll only be in your way,” a voice said. He let go of Gerard and quickly turned around, but there was no one there.

“He may even turn against you. Can you trust him? He knows your plans, Francis.”

“Yes,” he faced Gerard again. “You know of my plans.”

Gerard opened the door and ran. Behind him through the open door, he heard laughter that hadn’t come from Francis’ mouth.

THE ANGEL'S CALL

“You are crossing the line again, Samael,” Michael said, his anger growing. “You must not interfere. It is not the way.”
“We both know how this is all going to end. Isn't it best that only a few die?”

Samael was right, and for the first time, he agreed with the fallen one.

“Just think, Michael, of the many who will perish. In a way, I am helping you to save lives. One has already met his death, and another has just barely escaped. You know there will be more if we stop now.”

“Why have you shown yourself to Karl and Mary?”

“You do not know?” Samael chuckled. “My, my, you have not been doing your homework, my friend. Are you so lost in his eyes? If you want to know, I will tell you.”

“Tell me.”

“The pretty one and I talk of the girl,” Samael joked. “For many years she worked as a charlatan, stealing money from an employment agency company she worked for by creating a phantom employer and using a nonexistent person to be allocated work there. The person she produced in her mind was being given a wage every week, which went into a secret bank account. After five months, she had built a nice account for herself, which she transferred to another account. When the agency started sending letters to this nonexistent company regarding payment, Mary resigned, closed the account, and changed her name. The deception was so easy for her. The company she used was one that had gone bankrupt. She used that money to start her own business as a clairvoyant, a charlatan, taking money from people who believed.

“And as for your beloved Karl, how many times has he been involved in stealing property away from burnt buildings? You know there have been safes cracked open and money taken after the authorities were told it was burned. He lined his pockets with the

misfortunes of others, Michael, this beloved one of yours. Marijuana plants taken and sold – with the help of the local police, of course. And maybe worst of all, taking payoffs from companies to hide fire hazard infringements from his reports. Your boy is not as innocent as he makes himself out to be.”

Michael shook his head. “But not now. He is not like that anymore.”

“It does not matter, Michael, whether he has changed or not. I have to see it the way it comes to me. As the Angel of Death, I cannot stop what I have come to do. I may be assisting you to control the number of innocent deaths, and that is part of my work, ensuring there is the balance.

“And as for the great Catholic leader? Please! A man of the Church who has a tie to the mafia and ordered one of his own Christian men to be killed? I need not explain any further about him. And what about the greedy Mr. Francis Twilly? An Englishman obsessed with getting his hands on those books. I can smell the evil in him. He *wants* to kill, and he will, if anyone gets in his way. All these people have their calling card, and as it is all tied in together, it may all happen at once.”

“Are you not tired of all this, Samael? Are you not fed up with not getting what you want? Here we are talking as old friends, yet when we are down there, we are battling with each other. Here we are, good and evil.” Michael smiled, finding this quite ironic and said no more.

“My dear friend, we go a long way back. I remember how we used to drink together, laugh, and get drunk. Those days will always be a memory of joy. However, I was the one who fell. I was the betrayer, and I was punished. To the minds of some, I exist now, and I have followers. I may not be God, but I am a type of god, and I like it. Yes, I lose my battles, but that is what keeps me going. And until the world comes to its end, I will be here.”

Samael suddenly turned behind him, a dark mist appearing before his eyes. A minion emerged, hissing at him with disgust, then turned to glance at Michael. “BE GONE!” Samael ordered. In abhorrence, the minion vanished. Samael smiled. “They do watch over me. They see you as a threat.”

“Of course they do, because I will not hesitate to vanquish any of them if they ever appear to me.”

“Michael, I talk to you as a friend. You know that you, like me, will always be in existence. For you, it is unfortunate because of the way you feel. Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael are all in the same position. They, too, are being called on and doing their jobs. Our existence has been written.”

“In whose blood, Samael? It certainly wasn’t God’s.”

“Are you starting to disbelieve?” Samael laughed. “There is always room in my community,” he joked and clapped him on the shoulder. “It is unlike me to continue such a conversation, but how do you explain your situation? It seems like only yesterday that the war started,” he reminisced. “You do remember the war, don’t you? What was once heaven is now gone. How many years ago was that?”

“Too many years ago,” Michael answered.

“Yes, it was, and you are still here. We are not imagined. We are the forces that people accept, and there are people who are afraid of us.” Samael thought of Francis, and his smile widened. He was going to have fun with him. “Now, Michael, we have a job to finish, a story to end. I may be the one that people fear, but I also can be the one to help you.”

Michael smiled. “Ah, Samael, your heart isn’t as black as you make it out to appear.”

* * *

“It is going to take some thinking to get through those people and police.” Mary glanced at her watch.

“It’s not the people I am concerned about. It’s the police.”

“And what about him?” She pointed at Samael.

“You wait here.” He began moving through the crowd.

“Oh, no you don’t. I am right behind you.” She grabbed at his shirt and followed him to where Samael stood.

The two stared at each other, one with a grimace and the other with unease. Samael broke the silence. “So we meet for the second time.”

“Why can I see him and not Michael?” Mary asked Karl.

“I don’t know. Why is that?” he asked Samael. “Can everyone here see you?”

“Of course they can. But enough silly questions; time is of the essence.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Your calling.”

“I know what you are. You can’t control what happens to people.”

“But that is where you are wrong. Existence has a meaning. Look around you. Look at every person here. Each one of them has been given a reason to live. Before they were born, their lives had been written. The moment one is conceived, a soul enters its being – a soul with its own story, a beginning and an end. You and your lady friend here have to fulfil your part of the story.”

“And we shall,” Karl said with a smirk. “And the ending shall be the way I want it to be.”

“I am sure you will be able to change the outlook of what has to be, but remember the consequences.”

“You mean the balance,” Mary said. “You know, I am getting a little tired of hearing that.”

“So, is the Angel of Death going to help us get in there?” Kyle pointed to the entrance of the cave.

“I am not as bad as what society makes me out to be, but once you are in there, what happens will not be my doing. I will be waiting for a soul or two.” Samael sniffed the air and smiled. “Ah, yes, I can smell the imminence of fresh souls.”

Mary stared at the handsome face, though she felt that behind it all, a mask covered a horrific visage that could well be the genuine look of pure evil. A cold shiver ran down her backbone as she studied the inner soul of this demon – if he actually had a soul at all. Then she felt it! She knew he fed on her fear, her thoughts, and her energy.

And the most horrific part was that she was drawn to him anyway.

* * *

Karl shook her awake, seeing Mary’s eyes melt into his the same way his had when he first gazed upon Michael. He stood in front of her calling her name, and slowly she came to.

“Karl, you can charm one’s mind. You have it in you,” Samael said, although on turning around Karl saw no one.

He had a strong sense of knowing what to do. The strange thing was, he couldn't quite understand what he was doing as it came to him in a sudden burst. Without realizing it, he stared at one of the policemen guarding the entrance of the cavern. Catching his eye, he threw a mental command at him

"We are government officials. Let us through."

The police officer directed them toward him with one hand. "Venuto qui," he said, and grabbing Mary's, hand they stepped toward him. He instructed another police officer to follow, which was not a good idea, and in his best Italian, Karl explained to him that it was okay for them to go in alone. He was sending out thoughts without thinking about the end result, but in these moments of sudden and drastic actions, there was no time to ponder over what may happen. He thought it best to get in and out of there as quickly as possible. However, he did dread the thought that one of them may not come out of there alive. In fact, it scared him.

They entered the cave, and Karl immediately smelled flesh – not the stale stench of old stone, mud, and musty air that had never escaped the surroundings for many years, but decayed flesh, embedded in the old stonewalls. As they walked further into the cavern, something seemed to reach out to him, trying desperately to capture his attention.

He thought back and wondered why these things were happening him. Never had he experienced such phenomena with supernatural gifts, and they seemed to have come along at the same time Michael showed up. He was still finding all of this hard to accept, even though the attestation was in front and all around them. The concept of such a book being so important to so many people was a still little out of the ordinary – if the book indeed existed.

So, here they were, two people imitating government officials, roaming ancient caves with dead people talking to him (or trying to anyway). "Can you hear them?" Karl asked Mary, looking at the walls on either side of him.

"Hear who?"

"There are so many of them who died here in pain... so much pain."

Karl suddenly knew what he was feeling. He was in the final resting place of over 4,000 Capuchin friars who died between 1528

and 1870, as well as several poor Romans. He saw a large number of bones nailed to walls in intricate patterns, many piled high among countless others, some hanging from the ceiling as working light fixtures.

In quick succession, his mind flashed through the six crypts, and the image that hit him like a brick to the head was the crypt of the three skeletons. There were two small skeletons against the rear wall where they were holding in one hand a skull with wings made from shoulder blades. Impressed into the centre of the vault was a delicate skeleton enclosed within an aureole, the symbol of life coming to birth. In its right hand, it held a scythe, the symbol of death, while its left hand held the scales, symbolizing good and evil. He saw four small five-pointed stars surrounding the bones used as light fixtures. What did these monks have to do with the *Book of Secrets*?

He looked at Mary, and then toward the walls on either side of him and slowly, without thinking, reached out with his right hand as if to grab hold of something. He could see there was nothing there, but he felt and knew there was somebody or something reaching out for him. He moved closer to the right side of the wall, his arm extending and getting nearer the crumbling barrier. Just before his fingers touched the mortar, a powerful image so vivid flashed across his mind. It hit him like some invisible force, striking Karl with such intensity that it made him stumble and fall to the ground.

Mary quickly rushed to his side, but before she was able to touch him, he held up a hand in silence to let her know he was all right. The image was still with him as he stared at the wall in front of him. The hand was still reaching out to him.

Karl stretched his hand toward the apparition and on touching the ghostly hand, he saw an image of a man, bloodied from head to toe with wounds deep and painful from cuts to the skin caused by thorned whips and knives. The wounds inflicted were too deep to heal, and he could see the man struggling as he attempted to leave some form of markings on the stone. They were numbers being etched, and though he could not see them clearly, his mind told him they were one, five, six, five.

“You are a Templar?” Karl asked silently. There was no answer, but the clothes he wore and the red cross design in the middle of his chest told him that he was a Knight. Then came the sound of

anguished cries, pain, and sadness, and in the middle of all this, he heard three words uttered distortedly: “*arcino, otica, eulalia.*”

The shrieks were getting louder, the noises in his head thumping wildly and causing him to wince in pain. He saw images moving fast inside his mind: churches, bloody battles, and the number thirteen seemed to conjure itself repeatedly. The strangest thing he saw was the image of geese. Karl backed away, his eyes fixed on the hand, which was now slowly retreating into the wall. Before disappearing, it drew a five-pointed star in midair, and then it was gone.

Everything grew silent.

Karl looked at Mary, who was a little distraught. “Karl, you’re scaring me,” she said. “What happened? What did you see?”

Before he could determine how to answer her, his gaze shifted slightly to her right as he heard footsteps approaching. Mary turned to look behind her to find a silhouette of a man slowly taking shape, with others behind him.

“There they are. Arrest them!”

Mary stepped beside Karl and put her arm around his waist. He could feel her trembling. There were pistols aimed at them, and the leader was definitely not from the Italian police. He was well dressed and had an Australian accent. He looked much too corporate to be slithering around in ancient tunnels. He seemed more equipped for collating paperwork.

“So many years,” he began with a smirk. “So many, many years I have waited, and now, the glory will be mine.”

“What on Earth are you talking about?” Karl asked. “Who are you?”

“You are not in any situation to ask questions. You are trespassing. However, I do thank you for leading me in the correct direction.”

Karl had no idea who the man was and tried extremely hard to get in touch with Michael, to no avail. “You’re here for the book, right? I can lead you to it,” he said, pointing further down into the darkened cave.

“Oh, no! I am not going anywhere. I am not *that* stupid. I was warned about you – a gifted person, the one who would eventually have a book in your hands, a book more powerful than any artefact ever uncovered. Even the Pope himself has had his eyes on it. I am surely not letting an amateur outdo me. I have been searching for the

book nearly all my life, just as my father did before me. But my father was stubborn and sometimes not so bright, always wanting to do things his own way. Me, I leave the hard work for others to do. With some help, I traced you here, came straight from the airport, in fact. Didn't want to miss out on anything."

"And you are controlling these men?"

"Of course, my boy, the same way you managed to gain access into this cave."

Karl stared at the spot where he had seen the arm protrude and concentrated until bony fingers extended out from the wall, their hands gripping the ankles of the police officers. At first, the police only looked down at their feet, seeing little in the dimly lit cavern, unable to determine what was clutching at their legs.

When their eyes adjusted, their screams confirmed what they saw. In a panic, two of the four dropped their guns and fell to the ground, clutching at their legs and yelling, "Lasciato vada di me!" One of the officers still clutching his gun began shooting downward like a maniac, the bullets making their way through his boots, skin, and then shattering his bones.

Karl couldn't hold on to the image any longer. He grabbed Mary by the arm and pulled her toward him, and the two started running deep into the cave. In his rush to get out of the situation, he didn't think of the consequences of running, and before he knew it, Mary had caught a bullet in her thigh, knocking her to the ground. The screaming grew louder in Karl's ears and inside his head – screams from the officer who had shot himself in the foot, and horrid cries of pain and terror from the souls of the dead. The haunting noise was beyond any mortal's hearing capacity, but Karl could hear each wretched cry. His head began spinning, followed by pain in his ears and a tremendous headache. He tried to block out the screams by covering his ears, but it didn't help.

Only Michael's voice could slowly quiet the shrieking souls in Karl's head.

"Implant the noises into his mind," he commanded.

And Karl did just that. Concentrating, he willed the voices out of his mind and toward their stalker. Within a moment, the voices started to fade.

"What's happening?" their pursuer shouted.

“You are experiencing the sounds people make when they are dead!” Karl saw the fear growing on the man’s face. While he still had his finger on the trigger ready to fire, the revolver began shaking, as if it had a mind of its own. It convulsed about in all directions, making it impossible for him to fire on his targets. The dead seemed to somehow have authority over any human reflexes, and the pistol fell to the ground, followed by their assailant. This was the moment to assist Mary to her feet and get the hell out of the cave.

As he helped her up, Karl noticed that not one of the four police officers were in the tunnel – not even the one with the destroyed foot. He couldn’t remember seeing them flee, and it wouldn’t be long now before others came. He was sure people outside the cave would have heard the sound of gunfire, and it wasn’t going to bring good news.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said as they moved deeper into the cave. The walls were slowly closing in on them, the path narrowing as the darkness and the damp, musty smell gradually enveloped them.

Mary kept in pace, though her leg screamed with pain with every stride she took, but she was not going to let a gun wound ruin the find of a lifetime. Regardless of her resolve to complete this quest, the nausea mounting from her stomach to her throat was getting stronger, and she wondered how much longer it would be before she fainted. She held on strongly, and hope arrived when a stream of light filtered from somewhere in the distance. She anticipated it was some form of an exit.

As they walked further, both sides of the walls began to brush their shoulders, and the closer they neared the exit, the narrower the passageway became. Karl turned to look at Mary. “I think we may have to crawl our way to the end. Think you’ll be okay? It’s around a hundred metres.”

“Well, we can’t turn back.”

“How’s the leg?”

“Killing me,” she answered, pushing Karl gently to continue. “The sooner we get out of here, the sooner I can get this looked at. Let’s go.”

They both fell on their stomachs, commencing their slow crawl toward what they hoped was a suitable exit. Mary found that dragging her leg across the rubble was more painful than walking. With every effort, she winced at the excruciating pain as she dug her

fingers into the ground to drag her body forward inch by inch. This brought tears to her eyes, and in an effort to quell an agonizing sob escape her mouth, she bit her lower lip – a little too much, for she soon tasted the salty tang of blood.

Twenty minutes later, they reached the mouth of the cave, both of them covered in soil and ancient dust. Mary spat out dirt from her mouth as her body reached the exit, and still on her stomach, her eyes met with a pair of black boots. “Shit!” was all she could say as a pair of strong arms lifted her to her feet.

“Questa gente non dovrebbe essere qui. Prigione loro,” Francis said.

“What did he say?” Mary asked, looking at Karl anxiously.

Karl’s eyes focused on Francis. “We’re being arrested,” he replied.

* * *

“What have I done?” the Pope asked more to himself. He looked very pale as he sat on his bed, his back resting between two pillows.

“What is it that you have done, your Holiness?” The Cardinal of Saint Stephens carried a pitcher of water to the Pope’s bedside table and carefully filled a glass for him. He set the pitcher down, grabbed the glass of water, and held it out to the Pope, who would not take it and only lay there motionless. After a moment, he gave up and set the glass back down next to the pitcher.

“Whatever has happened, the Lord will forgive.”

This brought the Pope to attention, his head slowly turning to face the Cardinal with eyes filled with shame and fear. When he spoke, his words faltered, and he tried hard to gain some sort of composure as words spilled from his quivering lips. “For how many years have we fought to keep right from wrong? To teach people that God does exist? We fight against abortion, stem cell research, and homosexuality – to name a few. Why are we doing this? What makes us think we are perfect? Who are we to judge? We warn of false prophets, which is what we are. Fakes!” His voice lifted a little, and not for a moment did he turn his gaze away from the stupefied, speechless Cardinal.

“Stem cells,” the Pope continued, now looking down at his hands. “It is a science that may cure so many diseases.”

“It is a living tissue, and it is against what we believe in.”

“And is that what you also think about homosexuality?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, you are a fool,” roared the Pope in anger, watching the Cardinal’s expression melt into astonishment. “And you believe that homosexuality is a choice, that men choose to live that life? If this is what you believe, then you are even more of a fool. The Church adopted these lies, smearing defamation, making society believe what we want them to believe. We are spreading lies! Look back at all the evil, the corruption within the Church, within the religion.”

“What has gotten into you?” The Cardinal was now at the door.

“And abortion?” the Pope continued, “A woman has every right to rid a foetus before a certain period. Why should an unwanted child be born to a mother who does not want a child? A baby with no father! An innocent discarded like trash!” He cleared his throat a bit and then yelled in fury, “HOW DARE WE JUDGE! We are hypocrites!”

Pointing a finger to the Cardinal, he said, “I know what you are thinking, but I am not falling ill to madness. I need you to see the truth, to accept the truth, Cardinal.”

“And what truth may that be?”

A smirk appeared on the Pope’s face. “You are asking me what the truth is. We are fake; I am a fake. I am no saint, and my sins are as many as the next person’s. Tell me you do not have sexual thoughts, to touch yourself and masturbate. For many years, I have done that. What of the men you have had relations with, that strong sexual urge to be naked with another male body?”

“This is absurd! You are not well. I will fetch a medic.”

“No, you will stay and listen to what I have to say. We have known each other for many years, and we both know our secrets, even if we have never discussed it with each other. Our sins go against what we are supposed to believe in. Your sin is homosexuality, but mine goes beyond that.”

“Are you confessing something?”

The Pope nodded. “Yes, and it will also be my end.”

CONFESSIO (I)

“The secret has been passed to each ordained Pope; a sworn secret that the remains untold.

“Throughout centuries, the Church has had its hands on something that may change the belief toward Christianity and many other things that the Church and its followers believe in. We have in our possession one of four books, supposedly a copy of an original transcript alleged to have been written by angels – the only *true* Bible! What it contains is factual information regarding the existence of man, religion, and how the end will evolve. Nobody is certain as to its contents, but what the Church believes is that the story of Catholicism is not the faith we have made it out to be, according to this book.

“The Templars found this book in a convent, buried deep amongst the ambers of burned wood in a metal chest which had particular sigils and numbers engraved around the box depicting Pagan gods. They opened this box to find a book and a letter carefully folded and placed amongst the pages of the book. The letter was dated three days before the fire. To my recollection of what the letter said – and mind you this information has been passed on to me by previous religious leaders, and who knows what information has changed throughout the years – it read:

“What must one do to hide the truth? Is this life we live a lie? There is no heaven, and hell is the Earth we tread on. There is power within these pages, and evil can manage to power itself if it ever possesses it. There are others who are hungry to acquire the tome, but I must not let them find it.

“I cannot remember the rest, but the letter was written in the same language as the book, the language of angels. No name was found on the letter, nor any other clues to suggest who had written it.

“The book was found within the Capuchin Crypts. Nobody was able to make interpret it, as there seemed to be a lot of words that didn’t make sense. It took ten years before we were able to figure out

what this book contained, eventually discovering that it was not genuine. It is this same book that the Vatican now holds under lock and key. It is one of four. Three of these are fake, and the genuine one is still hidden somewhere. The copies do tell of the original tome – not directly stating this information, of course, but codes have been replaced by words, symbols, and numbers. What it does say clearly is that only a few chosen ones will be able to read and understand its content.”

“I have heard of this tale, but it has not been proven,” the Cardinal pointed out. “There is also no proof that the book really exists, and wasn’t it said that the whole concept of this book was a hoax?”

“Yes, we did say it was a hoax, but that was only to stop the curious from venturing out to locate it. We secretly kept on looking for the book in hopes that we might find it first. My nephew was the last to set out on this adventure, and he went crazy and killed himself. His last words to me were, *‘I can’t get the voices out of my head. Please stop them.’* I believed very much that he was close to finding the book.”

“Did he leave any notes, any clues?”

The Pope shook his head sadly. “Nothing. But that does not mean that there is no book.”

“How can you be so sure?”

The Holiness smiled weakly. “You can accept this as a confession, for I know I do not have much time left on this Earth. I am no holy man. I am just like any other man who has had sexual desires, hate, anger, emotions that control my moods, and many a sin committed. I sent a brother to Naples to run an errand. He was murdered by the mafia. I sent him to his death, an innocent child who did not deserve to be killed.”

“And why do you blame yourself for that?”

“Because the message was intended to be delivered to the mafia in order to have someone else killed”

There was complete silence, and the Cardinal could not believe what he was hearing. A chill went through him as he stared at the aging man in disbelief. He didn’t want to believe any of it, though deep down inside, something told him that part of it was true.

Afraid, he concentrated on asking about the book. “Does not the book give at least some idea, some indication of its contents and where the original can be located?”

“From what scholars can gather, it says that only a handful of people can solve the puzzles, and they alone can outline the history and its origin. The rest of it is gibberish.”

“And the Freemasons? Are they not considered to be the followers and the next generation of the Templars?”

The Pope laughed dryly. “The real followers are the descendants. It is them the book is talking about. The Knights have siblings, four people; one descendant from each Knight. Each sole surviving descendant carries with them an element of power and an angel to guide them.”

The silence returned, and the Cardinal thought it would be the appropriate time to excuse himself, but he couldn't help standing there, motionless, his legs unable to move and his eyes fixed on the withering sinner. Again, he questioned whether all this was true. He suddenly felt danger, afraid, and nauseous.

He is telling the truth, all of it, he thought. *Every single word was the awful truth.* He really didn't care much about the tale of the stupid book, but more important were the other ghastly facts about his own private life, his exploits into the night with other men. It was this that brought the dread.

The Holiness, after a short moment of calmness, continued. “I never thought such things existed really. Have you ever seen before your eyes the images of the Ark of the Covenant, the spear that pierced Jesus, or the shroud?” A smile came over him as the Cardinal shook his head. “Ah, Leonardo da Vinci, a very intelligent man and more of an inventor than a painter. He was the one who placed the image of his own face onto a piece of material. And what of the Holy Grail? Is it really the vessel that Jesus drank from? There have been many pictures of the Grail, but have we ever proven its existence? So many questions and not enough answers to prove anything.”

“You get some rest, and I will arrange for—” He was cut off by a sudden knock on the door, which jilted the Cardinal a little. Abruptly, he opened it.

“There is a gentleman to see you, your Holiness,” the messenger said, bowing. “He did mention that it is of utmost importance.”

“How on Earth was he able to just waltz in here? Who is he?” the Cardinal demanded.

“He said his name is—”

“Send him up right away,” the Pope interrupted. “And I would like privacy. Inform all that I am not to be interrupted.”

Once they had left, the Pope looked around him. “You must be so happy to hear the truth from a man who had dedicated his life to God.” He knew there would be no answer, but he also knew that he was there, listening.

THE ELEMENTS OF FOUR

The cell was small, cold, and musty, with a strong hint of urine coming from a hole at the back corner. Even though water would flush the toilet every hour or so, it never seemed to rid the vile stench. Along one side of the wall was a concrete bench where two other prisoners lay sleeping. They were clearly Arabic.

I was laying on a thin mattress on the floor that the generous police had given me, covered with a thin blanket incapable of relieving the chill. Staring up at the ceiling, I thought of how Mary was doing and how I was going to get us out of this mess.

I had to admit, I was scared. Never in my life would I have ever envisioned myself in this situation, locked up in a foreign country for trespassing while trying to find some magic religious book which probably did not even exist.

Anger came over me. I had been so stupid. *What on Earth was I doing? What has Michael gotten me mixed up in?* I blamed him for this mess. Without him, I could have been back at home continuing my normal, mundane life. Of course, I really didn't like that life. I had been stressed, angry on a day-to-day basis, had no social life, and was in constant anxiety of where my life was heading. *Now, here I am in deep shit! Oh, and dragging Mary into this. I'm a fucking genius.*

"It was her choice to come with you," a voice said.

"You are not my favourite person at the moment," I replied mentally.

"You are getting the hang of it."

"Stop the sweet talk, Michael. You can see where I am, and by listening to you, this is where I ended up!"

"It will not be too long before you are out."

"I'll believe it when it happens. How is Mary?"

"She is doing well. Sleeping and recovering. The hospital is taking good care of her."

I lay there silently, purposely not wanting to speak to Michael but not wanting him to leave either. I thought of returning home, though my sudden disappearance required an explanation, and I had no idea what I would tell anyone. My own son would be wondering where his father had vanished to, and rest of my family too, no doubt. I was certain they'd already gone and filed a missing person report. Anyway, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to return to that life I drastically disliked. In the grand scheme of things, an adventure to recover an ancient treasure was much more appealing, even if it had landed me in a urine-soaked foreign prison for the time being.

I heard Michael laugh. "What is so funny?"

"You and Indiana Jones."

"If I look at it that way, the hero always survives the adventure."

"Tell me about your childhood," Michael said.

"I think you know more about me than I do myself. Anyway, I need to find a way out of here, which is more important at the moment." *Maybe if I control the police like I did at the site to get me out of here? No.* Straight away I thought that to be a bad idea. It would probably get me into further trouble. "You mentioned I will be out of here soon."

"Yes, but you must let a short time pass by."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I said irritably. "Riddles. You're always speaking in riddles. Why is there so much mystery with you people?" Even though my words were silent, I felt my mental voice rise in anger. "I didn't ask for this."

"I know, and I am sorry, but you need to understand that there are forces at work and reasons why these forces have been put into play."

"Why me, Michael? So many people, millions of people on this Earth, and it happens to be me."

"There are four, Karl – four people. You are one of the four, and your element is water."

I shook my head in disbelief. "There you go again. Can't you give me straight and simple answers?"

"Very well," Michael answered softly. "The four Knights were guardians of many things, including the *Book of Secrets*. Each Knight took an oath to protect the book and the other treasures from prying hands. Have you forgotten about the elements and the watchtowers?"

I thought for a moment and could not recollect any information about the subject, and then it came to me: each element represented the watchtowers, the information Mary researched at the library back home. “Yes, I do remember.”

“You are the element of water, the fourth element to open the final gate.”

“And how did I become this element?” I said with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“No need to take that tone. You are the fourth son born on the fourth hour of the month when the watchtower was closed. These watchtowers are part of the creation of the world. Your ancestors were powerful and important people; though some, like the King of France and others similar to his throne, disliked them for fear that they would become more powerful and rich than he.

“Your lineage is very important. Unfortunately people in today’s society take many things for granted, and history is not something they can believe in or learn from. I have been a guardian watching over special people, selected people – mainly your family. Some possessed the power of The Craft, and others did not. You, Karl, are of the Knights’ blood and the last of the descendants.”

“What about others before me? Did they ever try to find the book? And what about the other three?”

“There have been others before you. Your father was a great man and carried many talents, but not enough to venture into the unknown. He actually despised his talents and your grandfather’s words. Your grandfather, on the other hand, enjoyed adventure and studied day and night learning about the book and other historical events. He never succeeded getting close to the book and spoke about this to your father, who claimed that the old man was a fool to believe in such things. But neither of them possessed the further power to keep the watchtowers closed.”

“And I do?”

“I believe you do. Anyway, throughout history, many have tried to reach the watchtowers magically via the occult, to open the doors and look into the mystery that lies behind them, but it is not just high magic that is required to get to the watchtowers and open the doors. You need the *Book of Secrets*, which has the formula and special instructions on how to conduct certain rituals.

“As for the other chosen three, Earth, Fire, and Air, these people are also on the trail. It is said that the four elements will meet at the book’s resting place.”

“How can you have so much faith in me?”

Michael chuckled. “You have seen and spoken to Samael. That is proof enough that you are not at your wit’s end.” I heard Michael sigh. “Samael is such a cunning person, though quite deceitful. You must be very careful of him. He has helped you in some way, but he does this in order to get what he wants: a favour for a favour. You must not give in to that.”

“Is he really the devil?”

“He likes to think he is. I sometimes see him as a playful child who gets angry when things do not go his way, always wanting to claim a soul but never succeeding. I think he knows that, but being so egotistic, he will not admit to it. He will also never admit that part of him is good.”

Michael fell silent, and this I welcomed, as it gave me more to think about. The hardest part of it all was accepting the whole story, and I think Michael knew this, but he believed in me – even though I did not believe in myself.

I closed my eyes, hoping sleep would come to me, and smiled. “I’m in love with an angel,” I whispered and felt the brush of lips on my forehead as I drifted off to sleep.

CONFESSIØN (2)

“The treasures were divided between them, and with each artefact, three copies were made. Did you know that there were four of each kind of artefact: four spears that pierced Jesus on the cross, four crowned thorns that were put on Jesus’ head, four swords that King Arthur removed from the rock, and so on. And, of course, four books.

“How much of this is true, nobody knows. There is no real evidence that any of these exist. The Holy Grail has never been sighted in real life. It is said that it is not the cup that Jesus drank from, but a woman.”

“I know all this,” Francis said impatiently.

“Let me finish.” The Pope stepped across the room, his hands cupped over a vial of holy water. He stopped and faced the chair, uttered something which Francis could not hear, and sprinkled the holy water onto the chair.

“Are you aware that the bloodline of these four Knights carries on?” He continued blessing the room, stepping from one corner to the other. “Their offspring will hold the key. They will possess great power.” He turned quickly to face Francis. “It is a power much, much greater than yours. None of your magic can help you. The boy is your only chance.”

“So there is definitely no mention as to where the Templars may have hidden the book?”

“They went their separate ways toward certain holy places, and there they would bury the artefacts. But really, anything could have happened through their journeys, so it would be like finding a needle in a haystack!”

“These holy places... which are they?”

“You are not serious with that question, are you? How on Earth would I know? I can give you guesses to so many areas where the book may have been buried. As I mentioned, nobody has proof if any of these artefacts exist, but is said that the four places the Knights

ventured to were Rome, Jordan, Spain, and France. Some believe that the treasures of the Templars are buried somewhere in Egypt, and others say it is in Petra. There has been a lot of time and effort put into searching these two areas, yet nobody has found anything. I think the young man can solve the puzzle.”

“You seem to hold quite a bit of faith in this boy. What else do you know about him?” Francis asked mysteriously.

“You mentioned to me about his ability of mind control. That is quite an achievement. A person who can do that must be very special, and powerful as well.”

“No. I think you know more than you’re willing to tell me.”

“It is up to you, my friend, to determine whether I am telling the truth or not.”

“Is there anything else I should know about the book?”

“You’re supposed to be the scholar in these matters. You have spent most of your life searching for it. All I have left to tell you is that the boy is the key. Remember that greed erases all senses, and the art of magic is one you can not rely on.”

He watched Francis exit the room and settled on the bed. He wasn’t alone.

“I am sure that you are well aware that throughout the ages, man has developed a sense of great storytelling and also how to hide the truth. I am sure you know very well how much of the truth has been hidden. The Church is a powerful one, with the government and the mafia on its side. The three of you can work together to control society, make people believe what you want them to believe, and make them afraid. And you think I am evil? Look at yourself. Evil resides in humans.”

“Shut up!” the Pope screamed. His hands began to tremble, his face twitching.

“Come now, accept it all. You are a fraud like so many others before you. Unfortunately, there are still many people who devote their time to you and will not dare to hear the truth. But one thing is for certain: the true believers will always believe in you, even if the book is found.”

The Pope pursed his lips, looking down at his trembling hands. He hid them beneath the blankets, and for the first time in many years, tears clouded his eyes. “I have been preaching the Word of God since I was twelve. My parents always warned me of the evil

that surrounded people. I remember them telling me that during the war, the devil walked amongst us, and when he found the appropriate person with a heart so black that he could control it, the devil would take over the world. They said the man he was looking for was Adolf Hitler, and the devil made him his right-hand man, a pact that if he won the war, both would rule, and Hitler would be known as the disciple of death. I was so afraid as a child hearing these stories and many more about how the world would be living in darkness. So, I turned to God in hopes that He would not let such a thing happen. And it didn't."

"Am I the devil?"

"You are no such thing. The devil is only a creation that the Church projected to society. A fallen angel does not make you the devil. You are a cunning spirit, and that is all you are." He laid himself down, closing his eyes as he rested his head on the pillows. He felt Samael hovering above him as he tried to sleep.

* * *

Karl was released on the second day, surprised to see Francis come to his rescue. He placed a hand on his shoulder and guided Karl away from the police station and into the crowded streets.

Immediately, he felt an unpleasant feeling as they apparently made their way toward the metro. The man asked many questions, and they all related to the *Book of Secrets*. He was also desperately trying to get into his mind, though Karl blocked him from entering. There was nothing about Francis that Karl liked or trusted. The man had tried to kill him, after all.

"Do you think you are the chosen one?"

"I don't know what to think, but if I had to answer, it would be no."

"There must be something special about you if the Pope gave the order to release you."

How fast can a brick hit you in the face? It stuns you, and for a time, you just stand there gazing into emptiness. These were Karl's thoughts. "The Pope?"

"Yes. And he believes you are the one who can find the book."

"So of course you need my help?"

“I think it is you who needs *my* help,” Francis said, his voice calm and quite joyful at the thought. “I can have the police here with a single phone call and have you returned back to that filth.”

Karl nodded, smiling. “Why is it that people always use threats to get what they want? I have nothing to say to you.” They entered the underground tunnel, which took them toward the platform where a hoard of people stood waiting for the next train to arrive. Karl realized that this could be his chance to escape. It would be easy enough to do, but he decided to go along with Francis. There was something he wanted to tell him.

“I have a few threats of my own,” Karl began as they slowly pushed their way onto the train. “Without me, you will never find the book, so if you really want it so much, I suggest you quit this bloody macho charade and let me walk out of here, because you do need me. Also, you will never know what is in here.” He placed a finger to his temple.

He moved away from Francis toward the exit doors at the next stop and quickly stepped out. He turned to see Francis smile and wave as the train slowly departed.

Behind him, amongst the crowd, two men followed closely.

* * *

Back at the hotel, Karl lay on the bed with Michael beside him. “There is one thing I find difficult to understand.”

Michael only looked at him. There had been no communication between them for hours.

“You. You, Michael. I don’t know what you are about. I thought I was beginning to know you, but I don’t. Here I am involved in something quite dangerous, and I have the Vatican and some secret organization following me.” He thought of Mary, bringing his anger to surface. “Fuck you, Michael! Mary was shot. She didn’t deserve that. You are supposed to be helping me. I don’t deserve this!”

“I’m sorry,” was all Michael said. He felt the pain, the hurt emitting from Karl.

“I just want a life without having to deal with the pain of others. Solitude. I was tired of my job, seeing burn victims, helping others and getting no recognition for the assistance I gave, people who were so involved with their own lives; self-centred, selfish bastards.”

Karl smiled, weakly tracing a finger down Michael's cheek. "When I met you, everything changed for the better. I felt alive, happy."

"And now?"

"My feelings toward you haven't changed, but my life has. I don't want to be chased by strangers, not knowing if I'll survive the night. I am afraid. I don't want to die."

"We are all going to die one day."

Karl laughed nervously, raising himself off the bed, and began pacing the room in thought. All of a sudden, he stopped dead in his tracks, turning to stare at Michael.

"Hours on end I have been trying to figure out the words told to me in one of my visions; *arcino*, *otica*, *eulalia*. I saw churches – large gothic churches – but the strangest vision of them all was the geese."

"Do you know what or who Eulalia is?"

"I have no idea. I spent so much time thinking about what I saw I eventually gave up trying to find the meaning of it all. It is just now they've suddenly come to mind."

"Eulalia was a co-patron saint of Barcelona, only thirteen years old. She suffered martyrdom during the Christian persecutions. For refusing to recant her Christianity, the Romans put her through thirteen tortures – she had her breasts cut off and was crucified on an x-shaped cross before being put inside in a barrel with knives and rolled down the street. It is also said that when she was decapitated, a dove appeared from her neck. The cloister encages thirteen geese, the number of tortures and the age Eulalia was when she died."

"Charming," Karl said. "So *arcino* must be Barcelona, the Roman name, the letter *b* missing, and *otica* must be *gotica*, gothic. The Cathedral of Santa Eulalia. What of the numbers one, five, six, five?"

"I can't help you with everything. It doesn't work that way."

"Then tell me about Francis."

"He belongs to a group his ancestors founded, creating an image very similar to the Freemasons. There had been a lot of bad blood between them and the Freemasons, but that is another story. Francis believes that if he can get his hands on the *Book of Secrets*, he can open the portals where the watchtowers exist. The book details rituals on how to open the doors, and Francis might have enough power to do just that."

“Yes, I kept feeling him trying to get into my mind. I don’t think he is that powerful though; it was very easy to block him.”

“He made a pact with Samael, promising his soul in exchange for Samael’s assistance in helping him locate the book.”

“And the fool believed him?”

“A person with only one intention in life who desperately seeks something that is worth more than life itself will do anything. Samael will never have any souls. He is destined to believe in something that he will never possess. But saying that, Samael is no fool! He knows how to toy with people, how to bring out their darkest fears, and he lies to the extent where the lies appear to be the truth. He is toying with Francis, and Francis is so immersed in his own ideas and greedy ambitions that he will never see this. He has tried this with you, but you are stronger willed.”

“What of the Pope? What is his involvement with all this?”

“The Vatican also has its interest in the book, and they too have been trying to locate it for many years. You are aware that it was he who released you? He believes you can locate the book. There is much bad blood between the two men.”

“I still can’t understand how the Vatican knows about me.”

“Samael may be evil, but there is also a good side to him. He has been with the Pope for some time. Between you and me, the Pope does not have long to live. He has been confessing to the Cardinal and to Francis, waiting for a sign – for you – in hopes of finding the book for the Vatican.”

Karl stepped to the window, drawing the curtains aside. Two men stood on the footpath. One of them looked up and nodded while the other concentrated on rolling a cigarette.

“Who are they? Francis’ sidekicks?”

“The mafia, actually.”

“What? I have the mafia following me as well?”

Michael was on his feet placing a comforting hand on Karl’s shoulder. “You don’t need to worry. The Pope hired them to protect you from Francis.”

“The Pope has dealings with the mafia?”

Michael chuckled. “You sound surprised.”

“If this was a movie, I could understand all of it, but this is real. Shit, Michael, the Italian mafia consorting with the Pope? It’s crazy.”

“The comradeship between the Vatican and the mafia has been going on for centuries. But let us forget about that for the moment. There have been many documented cases that the Catholic religion is false, and the Vatican is trying very hard to cover this up. The *Book of Secrets* is, in fact, the only real Bible, but it does not contain stories of God, Jesus, revelations, and so on. The Vatican wants the book because it tells not only of magical occurrences, the watchtowers, and other important information, but also the answer to life itself. There was no Jesus; no other religions exist except in the minds of man.

“The Church is very powerful and rich, and it wants to stay that way; whereas Francis wants to destroy it. If you do succeed in finding the book, the Vatican will want you to hand it over.”

“Do you think I will? Succeed, I mean?”

“That is up to you. How far are you willing to go? Let us say that the book is in your hands and everything inside it is true – the secrets do reveal facts, and one is able to open the watchtowers. Would you hand it over to the Vatican? Would you fight to stop Francis from getting it? What would you do?”

Karl thought for a moment, and then shook his head. “I don’t know. I do not know enough of the consequences it may cause. People are happy believing in what they want to believe. There isn’t any harm in that, and if society wants to believe in a religion that may or may not be true, that is their choice. As for Francis, I think I would burn the book if I didn’t have another choice.”

Michael stepped away from him, watching Karl stare down at the two men. He quickly conjured a book into his hands and held it out to Karl. “Here. Remember this?”

Karl turned around and saw the book in his hand. “It’s the diary.” He carefully took it from him, as if it were some priceless gift.

“There are more entries in it.”

“What do you mean, more entries?”

Michael kissed his lips. “Book the earliest flight to Barcelona and organize for Mary to return home. Once you have done that, settle yourself down and read the diary. Oh, by the way, you will be getting a visitor tonight.” With those words, Michael vanished.

THE ELEMENT: FIRE

He received two phone calls that evening, one from Francis and the other from the Vatican. He was overwhelmed when Francis left for Rome, a man he didn't care to like and a dangerous one at that.

Francis had called him to say he was leaving for Barcelona and would soon return with the book. *Is he that close to retrieving it?* This was not the news he was waiting for. But in fact, the second phone call was worse.

The Vatican called to tell him that the Pope had passed away. His Holiness had sent him there on a mission, an assignment to learn everything about Francis and report back. The problem now was that he couldn't report anything to anyone anymore because the only person who knew of his work was the Pope.

They wanted him to assist this stranger, this Karl, and keep Francis at bay. The Vatican had told him that a piece of parchment had been found inside an envelope bearing the words: *Read and contact Gerard. URGENT!*

For years, he had been supplying information to the Vatican about Francis and his schemes, especially when it came to the *Book of Secrets*. Francis wanted it, and so did the Vatican, and both were stubborn and difficult people to deal with. But it was Francis who he loathed more – a man whose soul was unquestionably black, and even blacker after that scene with this spirit.

They had asked him many times what the note meant, but the vow he took in front of the Pope before leaving the Vatican was something he was not going to break. "*We must know what this letter is about,*" they kept demanding, and he now had no time to argue. The book was in danger, and if Francis was clever enough to find it, he couldn't imagine the destruction he may cause. He hung up the phone and prepared for his journey.

In the last year, Gerard had learned that Francis had been studying the eighteen calls – the eighteen keys used to call up the angels and assist him with the watchtowers. He heard him most nights behind closed doors repeating the Enochian words. Each word had to be pronounced accurately in order to pass the first step. Francis understood that the ritual required three other people to be completed, and he would want the four to conduct the ritual in his presence. His knowledge of the calling would ensure that they were using and stressing the letters and words correctly.

Could this man, Karl, be one of the four? He had to assume that he was one of the elements, which meant that the closer they were to the book, the closer the four elements were to uniting. Of course, Francis wouldn't dare do anything to harm the man or any of the others. He needed them, unless he was strong enough to magically bring forth the elemental spirits and open the gates himself.

Gerard didn't know what would be going on in Francis' mind. But he knew he needed to be there to stop the book from being found.

He had made a choice many years ago not to pursue the book, and in the last week, he fought the premonitions that came to him, shaking them away. Gerard had felt the tug inside him at least two months ago, and the sudden appearance of Uriel proved that the time had come.

"It is best we leave it to rest," Gerard had said to the archangel. "I still stand by my decision. I choose not to be a disciple."

Uriel understood.

"The more we understand about life, the worse it gets. Look at the evil that still walks amongst us, Francis being one of them. We cannot have people like him possessing such a powerful tome, and even if the Vatican made it its claim, the Vatican walls will not stop evil from laying its hands on it. We cannot trust anyone."

"If you hadn't shut me out, you may have learned more about what was happening."

This was true. Gerard did not want to be part of this structure. He was one of the elements, the element of fire. Many times, Uriel had come to him, and every time, Gerard blocked him from entering his mind. He would see the blue haze shimmering in the darkness and banish it.

From the age of six, his parents thought that their only child was going through some psychological problems. It was not common for a child that young to tell people that he had an angel and was conversing with it. The final decision came when they caught him standing on the edge of a balcony four stories high yelling, "I want to fly like you!"

"I felt like my parents disowned me. Because of you, they sent me away. My father took me to Rome to a place run by specialists who took care of disturbed children. I was not a disturbed child at all. I remember a priest who came to see me day after day, and whenever I saw him, I tried to tell him how real you were. He would report my condition to my parents and return to tell me that I would be staying here until I was cured.

"Only I was never cured because I was never sick. You were always real. Slowly, my parents' visits became less frequent, and after three years, they stopped coming. However, you continued to be at my side, just like Father Contini. You comforted me when I needed comforting, but as I got older, I learned to start shutting you out."

Gerard though momentarily about his parents but didn't carry much emotion toward them. His mind then shifted to Father Contini, for it was he who had taken him in as his own child, a priest whose responsibility was to take care of the Pope's administration.

"I told him everything you told me about the book, the watchtowers, and everything I could remember. I was surprised one day when he came to me and said, '*Gerard, would you like to meet the Pope in person?*' I was seventeen. How many seventeen-year-olds get an invitation to meet his Holiness face to face? Father Contini had told the Pope everything I had told him. The Vatican believed in everything I had said, and they had been waiting for a sign."

Gerard began packing, looking through for the simplest things he could find. "I didn't want to be part of it. They told me Francis' story and how he was quite keen in finding the book. It was a chance for me to go and live in another country, and with the help of the Pope, here I am. I promised before I left that even though I would not involve myself in finding the book, I would try to stop the ones with wicked souls from ever finding it."

Gerard believed in the mystical and the supernatural and strongly believed that certain things were not to be found, like the *Book of Secrets*. He had played the charade perfectly for many years, learning more about Francis and his schemes and only reporting to the Vatican with vital information.

“I know I don’t have the right to ask you this, but what can you tell me about this man named Karl?”

Uriel’s ghostly appearance hovered behind him, and as Gerard turned to face the blue shimmer, it started to take form. It had been many years since he had actually seen Uriel’s human face, and he suddenly realized how much he had longed to see him.

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched the spectral being come to life. He was beside himself to see that after so many years, nothing had changed. Uriel was still as beautiful as he remembered.

“It is good that you have decided to let me speak with you.”

“I am only allowing this because I feel that what is happening is wrong. The book must not be found, and you all know this. It is not the time, and I do not think there will ever be a time. How many are there?”

“Three. The fourth is not ready.”

“Three elements have already united?”

“No. Only two. Once the four are together, it is then that the book will show itself.”

“If I stay away from them all, the book will be impossible to locate.”

“Not necessarily. The book can still be retrieved once the location is sighted. By having the four there, a type of magnet is created, which makes it much easier to locate.”

“I will not let that happen. I know what you want – what you all want. It took me a while before I realized that there was something incorrect about the whole situation.”

Uriel gave him a puzzled look, though he kept silent as he waited for Gerard to continue.

“Don’t look at me like that. You know perfectly well what I am talking about. It is the reason why I never wanted to have anything to do with you.” Gerard shook his head in disappointment. “You are supposed to be the servants of God, to carry out His will, but instead, you are toying with mankind to get back what you lost.”

“I was born under the element of fire. My archangel is Michael, and I represent the south cardinal. You can’t be who you really are. I don’t think it is meant to be this way, Uriel. You and the others cannot and will not change the facts. Tell me who the other three are.”

Uriel started to fade away, and Gerard raised his voice to the spirit. “You are a malicious spirit, Uriel – a destructive spirit who is to rule the lower world, and it is this world you want to rule. Am I right, Uriel?”

Gerard was left completely alone with his thoughts. He has to find these people and tell them the truth, and it was going to be up to him to ensure the book could never be found.

* * *

Karl made a tentative booking to fly out on Thursday, after searching high and low for his documents, which he couldn’t find anywhere. In fact, there were quite a few items missing – his camera, music, and other small items, which he thought very strange. But he wouldn’t have been surprised if Francis was behind it.

As for Mary, he would visit her the next day and talk her into returning home. He wasn’t going to risk her life again. The next gunshot could be a fatal one.

He went out for pizza, his two silent mafia security guards in tow. He nodded at them and smiled before ordering two large pizzas. On his way back to the hotel, he waited until the two men returned to their posts and gave one of the pizzas to them. “Enjoy,” he said with a smile.

“Grazie senore,” one of them uttered.

At least the mafia has manners, he thought, and for some strange reason, he began to laugh.

Settling himself on the bed with the diary on his lap and the pizza on one side, he started reading.

“I do not know how long I will remain alive. I do not know if my brothers are alive. I just hope their task is complete, as mine is. The order has taken me in as one of their own, and this I respect with honour. They are wonderful people, and they worship their God with much devotion, though they are quite intrigued with what I believe in.

“I have told them about my journey, but only to some extent, as I have been sworn not to divulge anything that may place me in jeopardy, though I must say that it is a little too late for that. I may be the only survivor, and after a considerable amount of time thinking this through, I decided to tell my whole tale, but to only one man – Father Pedro Bonnici.

“I told him everything about my order and of the treasures. I also told him about the Book of Secrets. I saw how his eyes lit in fascination when he asked me if it were really true. Apparently, they had heard stories of such a book but never believed it to be real. They asked if I knew where the book was, but this was the only information I kept to myself, as I could not and would not trust anybody. So, my answer to him was, ‘the fourth Knight carries the fourth book,’ but I was not the fourth Knight.

“Father Pedro Bonnici came to me one night, a wonderful and aging man whose eyes still held the power of a leader, and escorted me through a secret doorway which led to a series of tunnels before opening up to another passageway, where I encountered the most fascinating crypts I had ever seen. There were six crypts beneath the church, and each was given a name. The first was The Crypt of Resurrection, which showed a picture of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Human skulls surrounded this picture, a frame of sorts, which made the picture stand out. The second room was used as a chapel, though I saw no traces of human bones. The next three did contain skeletons, and in a way, I found some of the crypt names a little amusing but did not dare show this to Father Bonnici. He said the names were: The Crypt of the Skulls, The Crypt of the Pelvises, Crypt of the Leg Bones and Thigh Bones, and the last one, which I found to be the most fascinating, The Crypt of the Three Skeletons. In this last crypt, a skeleton was centred on a wall, its right hand holding a scythe. Words were written beneath it, and after reading what it said, it made my skin crawl: ‘What you are now, we used to be. What we are now, you will be’

“We returned upstairs to the church, and he told me how unrest was rising due to the conflicts brought on by different religions and kings. He told me we were great warriors and people of a true faith, but the symbol we held would destroy us, as it was doing at this very moment.

“I asked him why they had pentacles made out of bones, the same pentacle of my order. He explained that the pentagram was not only symbolic to Pagans, but also to Christians, though for many years there had been battles because of the misrepresentation of the pentacle. A true Christian believer only has one symbol, and that is the cross.

“I nodded in agreement as he explained the five pointed star, which I already knew, each point representing the elements of Air, Water, Fire and Earth; the fifth being the soul.

“As I never ventured beyond these walls, I was secluded from what was happening outside, and only from what Father Bonnici told me did I learn of the turmoil outside these walls.

“One night, he ran into my room, out of breath and his eyes filled with terror. He told me I had to escape, as the Romans were invading the church. I could not understand how this was possible, as these people were not warriors but peaceful men who only existed to follow their God. It then came to me that it wasn't them the Romans were after but me. Somebody within this order had sent word that I was here.

“Unfortunately, there was no time for my escape, and the only place to hide was in the crypts, but time was against me, and as I headed toward the secret passage, my body throbbed with the pain of a thousand bee stings. They were lashing me with a whip made from rusty nails. I felt my skin tear as tears of agony welled in my eyes. Father Bonnici saw this, and as I turned to him, I saw his lips silently move. He was praying for me. It was all he could do.

“He came to visit me one night, and at first I could not recognize him, as my eyes had been swollen. His voice confirmed who he was. I finally told him where he could find the book. I had hidden it in one of the crypts. I instructed him not to tell anybody of the book and that he must leave Rome with it and hide it where no person would ever find it.

“He retrieved the book, and that was the last I saw of him. I was lashed time and again, the nails digging further into my skin. Some had caught and opened up arteries, and it was impossible to stop the bleeding. They wanted to know the location of the stolen treasures that belonged to Kings. We were wanted by a few countries, and they would not stop searching for us until each one of us was dead.

“I had no food and water for days and slowly grew weaker and weaker. In front of me was a piece of paper stating my crimes and telling me to plead my guilt. I will never sign it! I would sooner die! I am sure that death will be upon me very soon. I thought of those words again; ‘What you are now, we used to be. What we are now, you will be.’

“It was the final beating that made me fall unconscious, the nails latching onto my skin and tearing my flesh like paper. They caught my ears and face, and nearly my eyes too, had I not dropped and covered them with my hands. I had no idea how long I was unconscious, but when I came to, I was alone. I dragged myself painfully toward the crypt, feeling the need to die there amongst the others. I managed to reach the first before the last of my strength finally faded.

“There I lay, waiting for death.”

* * *

Francis stood looking at the Pope, who appeared very feverish and weak. “I don’t want you to harm him,” the Holiness said between coughs. “He will find the book.”

“And you expect him to hand it over to the Vatican?”

“Don’t you think it is better in our hands than yours?”

“Unfortunately, my friend, you do not have much control over the situation anymore. I am as powerful as the Vatican. This country looks up to me, as I give it the money it wants and more for any excavations that take my interest. Money can be a powerful tool.”

“And so can allies, of which you have none.”

Francis laughed. “I don’t need allies. They are more troublesome than they’re worth. Anyway, I have a more powerful tool.”

“Samael?” The Pope tried to laugh but instead churned out more coughs. “You are even more of a fool than I thought. The black arts don’t help you. It only ridicules you. There are consequences to dabbling in the occult, Francis.”

“I will get the book, and the boy will help me. I never trusted you, and being a religious icon does not change the type of person you are. We are two very different people, and after so many years, here we are in the same room and still we have our differences. If it

weren't for the book, I wouldn't be here now. Will you give me your copy?"

"Never!"

"Fine, but remember... money talks, and the Vatican's greed will enjoy seeing a very – and I mean a *very* – generous offer of money for it."

"Francis, go on and continue playing this game that you are destined to lose. And as for Samael, a deceiving spirit, has he told you of his intentions?"

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

The Pope slid underneath the bed sheets, his eyes staring above him. "You and your minion will not conquer."

Francis watched, a little taken aback by the Pope's actions. There was a calmness in his tone, and he seemed to be staring at something. Yes, there was something hovering above him – a spectre! Francis felt it. Then, an unexpected shriek wailed throughout the room, yet the Pope's mouth remained silent. He covered his ears as he saw the old man laying still, his eyes open, and across his mouth... *Is that a smile?*

An eerie mist hovered momentarily, before circling the room and crashing through the window, shattering the glass.

"Samael," Francis whispered.

The door burst open, and five priests rushed into the room. "Natural causes," he said to them before they asked what happened. He placed a hand on the Cardinal's shoulder and said, "Time once again to elect a new leader."

* * *

Francis caught a cab to the hotel, paid the driver, and hopped out. Two men watched him curiously as he made his way to the entrance.

"Senore?" one of them inquired, approaching him.

Francis turned around. He had no time for games. *Whoever these men are, they had better leave me alone*, he thought. As soon as the one that spoke grabbed his arm, he entered their minds and placed a thought. In an instant, the two men made their way across the street and away from the hotel.

It was not difficult to acquire Karl's room number from the dim-witted hotel desk clerk. Francis walked up the staircase to the second

floor and searched for Room 202. He knocked, expecting no answer, but to his surprise, the door immediately opened.

Karl stepped aside to let Francis in. No formalities were exchanged, considering neither of the two felt the other deserved any respect. “Where is my passport?” Karl demanded.

“Just a precaution to ensure you don’t go too far.” He stepped to the window and looked out. The mafia guards were gone. “I don’t want you to go anywhere without me.”

“What makes you think I want company?”

“What *you* think is irrelevant. I call the shots.” He turned to face Karl with a smile. “I am not as bad as I make myself out to be. That is a façade. I work alone and do not have people working for me. No bodyguards – nobody. Yes, I am a greedy man, and I do like very much to get what I want. It is a trait. What I want is the *Book of Secrets*, and I want you to help me get it. I want your cooperation.”

Karl felt a little pressure in his head, a sudden pain that for a second or two made him wince. He looked deep into Francis’ eyes and with a burst of energy pushed him sideways and into the wall. “You think I can’t match you?” He felt a trickle of blood form at the end of his nose. He wiped it clean with the back of his hand. “You keep doing that, and I’ll burst your brains.”

Francis nodded, acknowledging the victory. “So, you are the real one. That’s proof enough for me. What about the others?”

“What others?”

“It is not the time to pretend we don’t know anything. You do know of the prophecy, no?”

Karl’s anger filtered through him, a headache slowly developing, but not enough to stop him from screaming inside Francis’s mind, “No, no, no!”

Francis stumbled to the floor covering his ears, though not a word escaped his mouth. “I can hurt you as easily as I can spit on you. Don’t tempt me. I am starting to get used to this newfound power, and I will use it against you if I have to.”

Francis started to laugh as the pain eased. “I do so want you on my team, but I want you to listen to me.” His voice now took on a more serious tone. He stepped to the bed and sat on the edge. “I don’t want to harm you. My intention was not to harm you *or* the girl. I didn’t know who you were. But try to understand the position we are both in. There are so many questions about life that we will never

understand, and there are a lot of people who need others to follow, to tell them what to do and what to believe in.

“The *Book of Secrets* is the key; it may have the answers to all our problems. It is a treasure of all treasures to be able to know what our lives really stand for. That book is the one and only scripture; think of the amount of power you can hold. It is why the Vatican wants the book. It wants to cover the truth, and I want to see the truth. I am an honest man—”

“An honest man?” Karl interrupted him. “Honest men don’t make pacts with devils.”

“Samael? Oh, I am just using him as a third eye, but lately he has been quite useless – a hopeless case actually. He can be terrifying at times, and I have to admit he has scared me once or twice.” He reached inside his jacket pocket and withdrew Karl’s passport, which he tossed over to him. “Let me tell you a story...”

FRANCIS TELLS HIS STORY

“My uncles belonged to an order, the Capuchin Friars,³ in the Province of Saint Augustine. It is from there that they built the order I am in now, but I am jumping ahead of myself.

“I remember when I was a teenager and my father took me to see the Capuchin Crypts in Rome. I was horrified and frightened, but at the same time, I was captivated and intrigued. For a child to see such horrors – bones of dead people, coffins, and so on – it was quite morbid, I must say, but I did not have nightmares. From then on, I found myself reading text books on the occult, spiritualism, and religious historical events, and the more I read, the more interested I became.

“My father used to sit me down and explain to me certain events that had happened centuries ago and tell me stories of artefacts that supposedly held immense power. He would show me a relic and tell me the whole history about it. What I found amazing was that I remembered everything he had told me – even though in school, anything related to mathematics, science, and so on went in one ear and out the other. But when it came to history lessons, I listened.

³ There are many sites on the Internet that speak of the Capuchin Order. The information in this book has been extracted from the following website:
http://www.cappucciniviavento.it/cappuccini_ing.html

Some information has been changed to protect the privacy and therefore the alteration made in this book of their existence is fictitious. For accuracy on the history of the Capuchin Friars, please visit the following website:
<http://www.capuchin.com/who/history-capuchins.php>

An Internet search will return many other websites about the Capuchin Friars, including the Capuchin Friars in Rome and the Capuchin Crypts.

“A few years later, he told me he had something of interest he wanted to show me, and I very excitedly followed him down the stairs to the library. Pointing to a table for me to sit, I did just that and watched him step to a solid wooden cupboard, which he unlocked with a key he carried in his hand, and carefully pull out a book. He held it with such care that it looked like he was holding some type of explosive, and the way he sat it down in front of me so slowly and with such care, I was afraid to even breathe on it!

“The covers were wrapped in some type of plastic, a special material to keep the book acid-free and clear of dirt. From a drawer, he grabbed some gloves, and as he put them on, he told me not to touch the book. He cautiously flipped the pages over, one by one. I stared at the bizarre writing, but even more peculiar were the drawings. He explained as easily as he could what the drawings meant, but unfortunately, he had never bothered too much to study ancient languages – well, not this one anyway. He claimed it to be the writings of angels, a language that no man has ever been able to interpret. He searched for a long time to locate a person who may be able to understand the writing, but he never succeeded.

“It wasn’t until one day, out of sheer coincidence, he was introduced to a man who claimed he knew the language; an anthropologist who studied scriptures and religious history. My father showed him the book, and the man froze for a moment with his mouth agape and eyes wide. He couldn’t seem to speak, and after a while, the man shook his head as if he was waking from his stupor. He asked my father if the book was original.

“My father shrugged his shoulders, and for days on end, the two would sit with the book in front of them and carefully study it until finally, weeks later, the man came to the conclusion that it was only a copy. The stranger was a little disappointed, and he constantly asked my father question after question about where the book was found, badgering him for answers.

“There was something strange about the man, and my father wanted very much to find out who he really was. It turned out that he was the Pope’s nephew, who was searching for the original *Book of Secrets*. A few months later, they found him hanging from a ceiling in a motel room.

“I stopped going to school and spent my teenage years with my father, though my mother wasn’t too keen on the idea at first. But

seeing how interested I was in my father's work, she thought it would be better for me to do this, knowing I wasn't any good in school anyway.

"It became an obsession, and I wanted desperately to find the book. My father gave up, but I sure as hell wasn't going to let anyone stop me. In fact, *hell* itself was going to help me!" Francis laughed at this and seeing that Karl had no interest in the joke, he continued with his story, wiping the smile from his face.

"For years I have been searching for the book, and the closest I ever got to the mystery of its hiding place was at the Capuchin Crypts, though I still do not know if those numbers and sigils meant anything. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about." He studied Karl's expression.

"You do know, don't you?" Francis asked, a little excited. "The book was given to one of the friars who then fled from Rome to journey to Barcelona, yes?"

Karl nodded. "Yes," he whispered. "It's all in there." He pointed to the small bedside table where he had left the diary, but the diary wasn't there!

"In where?"

Karl was slightly taken aback at the diary's disappearance, but he was learning to accept the impossible. "Never mind. There are clues to where it may be."

"You know where it is?"

"No, but I guess I've come this far, and there's no point stopping now."

"*We've* come this far, and I am going to be beside you all the way. I know more about that book than anybody, what it can do and what it can destroy."

Karl was in deep thought and didn't seem to hear or care what Francis had said. He stepped to the window and saw that the two men were no longer there. "Did you pay them off or just make them think they need to leave?" He then waved the question aside. "Don't answer that. I'd rather not know. Tell me more about the Capuchin."

"The order commit themselves to live as Saint Francis did; hence, my name. They wear brown robes, sandals, and ropes around their waists, and back in the old days, they would live in small houses away from big villages, praying and working in the field. Throughout their long history, Capuchins have tried their hand at everything in

all parts of the world. They have been travellers and missionaries, diplomats and community leaders; they have brought civilization and founded social works; they have been writers, artists, musicians, craftsmen, and even firemen, military chaplains and men of the people, saints and exiles – with all the virtues and the weaknesses of the people among whom they lived.

“In 1525, one of them arrived in Rome and began to help the sick at a local hospital. He wanted the protection of the Pope, and three years later, the Pope recognized the Capuchin Order.

“A church was built for them by the locals, and with the aid of the council, they also dug the crypts beneath the church.

“One priest or friar or whatever you want to call him learned a lot about Paganism but never dared mention this to anyone. Paganism was not something that was favoured back then. Now, these people were quiet and respectful folks and would do anything to help a stranger in need. When this priest heard of a stranger harbouring within the confines of the church, a man wearing garments of white with a red cross in the centre, he quickly approached the man, knowing exactly which order this stranger belonged to.

“Anyway, as mentioned, it was this priest who took hold of the book and disappeared. I can tell you more about them, but it will only be a history lesson, and I don’t think it will help in finding the book.”

“Can you get us into the Crypt tonight?”

Francis smiled, walked over to Karl, and placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. “Anything you want.”

* * *

The room was plain, like any other hospital really. The only difference was that the building was hundreds of years old, and the interior did need some sort of maintenance. Mary didn’t mind it, but it felt a little uncomfortable, like she had just stepped back in time. Maybe it was because she was used to modern architecture, but what did bother her was the smell of urine that hung in the air, which at times would get so strong that she had to hold her breath in order not to get ill.

She lay in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering when she was going to be released. They had said two more days, but the thought

of it repulsed her. The food wasn't anything special, and only a few of the nurses were able to construct even a few words in English. There wasn't anybody she could have a decent conversation with.

The man beside her started snoring, and the echoes of his snores vibrated throughout the room. She sighed, reached for her crutches, and used them to aid her up from the bed. She slowly left the room and sat down outside on the balcony.

"Damn it!" she cursed, gazing out into the warm night. "I'm in Rome and stuck in a hospital," she whispered to herself. She was also annoyed and worried because Karl hadn't answered his phone. She wasn't able to rest her mind not knowing if his was all right or not.

Sitting alone for a few minutes, she thought of the book and wondered if it really existed. So many texts had been written about archaeological finds and secret treasures, but how can one prove any of it to be legitimate? How many people had actually seen these so-called treasures of old?

The other strange thing was Karl. His powers were incredible and developing into a stronger force. She believed herself to have some talent when it came to the supernatural, but not like Karl. But to see Satan himself? *If it was him, he was quite a looker*, she had to admit, chuckling to herself.

She decided to head to the library on the third floor, a place she found to be a haven on nights like this, which happened to be every night. She spent hours reading on the occult. Unfortunately, there weren't many books on the subject, but enough to keep her occupied.

She saw one other person in the room, a patient who quite possibly, like her, found it difficult to sleep. He looked up at her, smiled, and returned to his reading. She headed straight to the back corner of the room and reached for the book she had been reading the previous night: *The Occult and the Bible*. She stepped to the nearest table, sat down, and continued reading where she had left off.

"... and Satan, along with his minions, were cast to hell, leaving the archangels to restore peace in heaven. Hell was a place on Earth, and it was where Satan had settled to roam amongst the living. The archangels would watch over the human kingdom until the resurrection of Christ."

This is heavy reading, she thought, and then smiled. The imaginations really ran wild back then, and they knew how to tell a

great tale. Mary then froze, staring into space, the sound of her heart amplified like thunder in her ears.

“Could it be?” she started in a whisper. *Stop it, Mary! You’re scaring yourself into an early grave.* She then looked around to where the other patient sat, wondering if she was talking too loud. He didn’t seem to notice her strange behaviour, and that relaxed her a little.

What if it is all true – the war in heaven, Satan among us? Could it have really happened? Is Samael the fallen angel? Her skin crawled with goose bumps, and a shiver filtered through her. Letting the thoughts and images fade, she continued reading about how the archangels were used in occult magic and how occultists used fallen angels to assist them in particular magic of a high ranking. She also came across some information she had researched back home about the towers.

“Many have tried to open the gates of the watchtowers, said to be guarded by the archangels. The Babylonians claim to have seen strange glows taking shape in the sky and believe it was a gateway to heaven. To this day, there has been no documentation to state that these doors have ever been opened by occultists or any other human beings. But if one ever succeeded, it may be the beginning of the end. It was the same doorway by which Satan was cast out of heaven.”

She closed the book and sat in thought. The question that annoyed her was why these angels were appearing to people, and if they were the archangels, what were they doing here and not guarding the watchtowers? Michael was Karl’s guardian, helping him to find the *Book of Secrets*. Did the book have something to do with the war in heaven?

Mary stumbled onto her feet and left the book out on the table. She made her way to a telephone, hoping she would get through to Karl. She didn’t know if he was still locked up, for every time she tried calling him, it would be answered by a recorded message uttering something in Italian, and then it would automatically engage itself.

After it started ringing, she impatiently waited for the recording to pick up. To her surprise, this time it was Karl’s voice, and relief flooded through her. “It’s you! We need to talk. I am a little worried about what is going on.”

She listened, nodding, then angrily said, “Oh, no! I am coming with you, and that is final. Book an extra seat and make sure I get out of here.” And then she hung up.

She returned to her room slightly exhausted. The snoring had stopped, and the room was dead silent. Samael entered her mind, and she imagined him falling from the sky. She placed the bed sheet over her head and closed her eyes in search of sleep.

Samael stood in the doorway. He was pleased.

* * *

They were on their way to the Capuchin Crypts. Francis had telephoned them in advance to notify them of their arrival. Karl admitted that Francis had a number of contacts here and abroad, and money was man’s best friend. If he understood correctly, Francis had offered them 500 euros to allow them entry, which sealed the deal.

”Before we head to the crypts, I want to stop at the tunnels.”

“Something there?”

“I don’t know, but I need to see if I can get some answers.”

Francis instructed the driver to take a detour, and within moments, the tunnels were in front of them. Hoards of people were gathered behind the barricade taking pictures, and Karl could not help but smile at seeing the spectacle.

Francis showed the authority his identification. The man nodded and guided them to the entrance. As soon as they entered, Karl heard the voices again. “Do you hear them?”

Francis shook his head. “Best you wear this.” He handed Karl a safety hat and then passed him a flashlight. He turned to one of the officers, uttered something in Italian, and then headed into the tunnel.

“Further down, I had an image of a Knight and the Capuchin Crypts.” Touching one side of the wall, he slowly stepped forward, the voices getting louder in his head, making it slightly difficult to concentrate.

“*Don’t trust him,*” a voice said.

“*He will protect you,*” another said.

“*He is lying. Don’t listen to him.*”

“Stop it!” Karl yelled. “All of you just shut up.” They fell into silence as he gave them a sudden push to leave his mind. “The Knight... I want to speak with the Knight.”

“You talk to the dead as well? I am impressed,” Francis said delightedly.

Karl shone the flashlight in his face, sending him a thought, which made him stumble a couple of steps back.

“Are you here?”

Silence, and then whispers, “*Don’t trust him,*” and then more silence.

Then, an image of the Knight flashed in front of his eyes, but this time he was sitting upon a white horse, full of pride with his head held high. “I saw an image of you writing something on the wall – the numbers one, five, six, and five. If you died at the Capuchin Crypts, why are you here?”

The Knight didn’t speak, but he showed him the answer, and then vanished.

“Let’s go!” said Karl.

“What did you see? What did he say?”

“I’ll tell you on our way to the crypt.”

* * *

“The priest the Knight gave the book to did go to Barcelona, but he returned after a few years,” Karl began to explain. “He died and was buried in the crypt, but there is one problem: I am just starting to realize that what I see is not necessarily exactly the way it should be. The crypts and the bones have had alterations done to them, and the transformation of the way the crypts look now was work conducted throughout the years until 1870.

“The priest died, but he was buried within the grounds of Saint Bonaventure. Years later, the Capuchin moved to this residence and transferred the bodies and remains of the Capuchin from Saint Bonaventure to here.

“Their bones, together with those of many other people buried in the cemetery, were used to decorate the walls and chapels of the crypt. Therefore, his remains are somewhere there, and with it, we will find some clue as to where he took the book. All we need to do

is locate something that represents the year of his death, 1565 – one, five, six, five!”

Francis handed over crisp, fifty-euro notes, and they were led to the crypt.

“Do you always carry that much money with you?” Karl asked him.

“You never know when it might come in handy.”

“I have no idea where to start looking. Crypt by crypt, I guess.”

“If you’re able to communicate with the Knight, why can’t you communicate with this friar?”

“I don’t know. They mostly come to me, and once they do, there seems to be a direct link with them. Either I cannot control it, or I just haven’t learned how to yet.”

“Do you hear any of them now?” Francis asked, pointing to the human bones around the room.

Karl shook his head. “They are at peace. I can feel that. Even though this place is so morbid and eerie, there is a presence of tranquillity, serenity.”

Karl looked around and saw nothing but skeleton parts around the crypt. On the rear wall of the room was a picture of Jesus emerging from his tomb, the skeletal bones forming a frame around the picture. There was nothing to indicate the burial of the priest.

They moved to the second crypt only to find it was set up as a prayer room. It was free from human bones, and again, Karl felt harmony in this room. “This area is the prayer room,” Francis explained. “They pray for the dead so that they are freed from the sufferings of purgatory and reach paradise.”

Karl stepped to where the altar stood, the top illustrating Mary and Jesus as a child, inviting saints to free the souls from purgatory. He felt nothing here and tried hard to see if he could at least communicate with a deceased, but there was only total silence.

As they left the second crypt, Karl felt drawn to the fifth room and quickly headed to what was known as the Crypt of the Leg Bones and Thigh Bones. Here, the sidewalls had four niches, each occupied by a standing Capuchin vested in a habit. Along the rear wall was a cross enclosed in a circle; underneath, the Franciscan coat-of-arms. On the ground, eighteen crosses marked the graves of various friars.

“This is it!” Karl said excitedly.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Francis asked, pointing to the tombs. “If he is buried in one of those, how the hell are we going to dig him out? Sorry, I finally managed to get into your mind. It is what you were thinking.”

Karl took no notice of the last comment. “You’re the one with the money.”

He heard Francis’ footsteps retreat while he studied the crypts one by one; their concrete covers were flush with the level of the ground, making it impossible to raise the lids. He tried reading the inscription, but the only thing he could decipher were the dates. There was a pattern here; the monks were buried in the order of their deaths, clockwise. So, the one they were looking for would be among the first. He crawled to the first tomb on his right, and there it was – Father Abraham Bonnici, 1565.

He looked up to see Francis with four other monks behind him. “This is it,” he said again.

“It had better be. This has cost me more than I expected. The deal is, whatever we find, it remains here.”

Each of the friars took a position around the crypt, and holding a long wooden rod with a digger knife attached to its end, they started digging into the tar, scraping the residue from the edge.

“Have any trouble persuading them?” Karl asked, watching the monks at work, anxiously waiting for the uncovering of the crypt.

“It seems money is more important than desecrating the tomb of a dead person. What do you think we’ll find in there?”

“If it’s the same priest and he returned with the book, then we don’t need to look any further. Apart from that I have no idea. Hopefully some clues.”

An hour later, the monks had dug enough to be able to clasp four large iron hooks into the holes embedded in the lid. One of them grabbed a chain dangling from a pulley from the roof and threaded it through the four eyes of the hooks. Together they started pulling on the chain, heaving little by little until the lid began to move. After a few tries, they put all their strength into it and lifted the lid, raising it a few inches.

Quickly, Karl and Francis stepped to the tomb. They pushed the lid away from the coffin and slid it sideways to rest on the tomb next

to it. The smell was strong – a stench that nauseated Karl. Even Francis turned his head away from the hollowed eyes of the skeleton that looked up at them.

Karl examined the coffin, hesitating to touch the fully decomposed body of Father Bonnici. Apart from a brown robe and a Bible he held in his skeletal hands, he saw nothing else of importance. The Bible would be the first to assess for any clues, and when he tried to pry the book from the hands, the bones crumbled at his touch. “Sorry,” he apologized, looking at the monks, who were too immersed in their own prayers to notice.

He carefully took the book and was flipping through it when he noticed a piece of paper protruding from its pages. He opened the page where the parchment sat, took hold of the piece of paper, and then placed the Bible back in the coffin.

Francis approached from behind, looking at the aging parchment and the figure drawn on it. It was a square with a triangle above it, and in the centre of the square was a pentagram.

“Can you make anything out of this?” Karl asked him, handing him the parchment.

Francis carefully examined the aging paper and noticed a strange yellow colouring around it. He smiled, knowing exactly what it was. “They even used this technique back then.” Francis asked for a piece of lemon. It was an odd request, but no questions were asked, though the monks and Karl seemed full of intrigue.

A moment later, Francis held a lemon wedge in his hand and slowly began to rub the juice on the parchment. “I’m sure we are going to find something written on this.” From his trouser pocket, he withdrew a lighter, flicked it on, and held the note above the flame at such a height to heat the lemon juice without burning the parchment. Slowly, words began to magically appear.

“The Cathedral, Saint Eulalia,” Francis whispered. “The gothic quarter in Barcelona. The mystery is slowly unravelling.”

Francis was the first to exit the crypt after returning the parchment to the monks. Karl followed behind, but as he stepped out of the crypt, he heard a voice, which made him stop in his tracks. In his mind, he heard the voice clearly and knew whom it belonged to.

“Don’t trust him. Leave the book in peace.”

He glanced over at Francis, who looked at him with uncertainty. “Just thought I heard something,” he lied and followed Francis out.

PART THREE

BARCELONA

FATHER BONNICI'S STORY

“The priest is an immense being because he makes the crowd believe astonishing things.”

– *Charles Baudelaire*

Father Bonnici sailed to Barcelona, the book he was given concealed in his garments. Before he left Rome, he designed a cover to hide the book's authenticity to make it look like a regular Bible, so nobody would be the wiser. Even if they did find the book, he doubted if anyone would be able to understand its content, for even he could not fathom anything that was written within its pages. Such a strange language it was, and if it was the language of the angels and its contents did reveal what was to happen, the book was too dangerous to be left out for peering eyes to see.

He had promised the Knight he would hide the book and not a soul would know about it. Quite a mystery this was, and curiosity got the better of him. He needed to know more about the importance of this tome. He called it the *Book of Secrets*, and after hearing the story of its origin, Father Bonnici tried to look at the lighter side of it. *A witch's book perhaps? A Book of Shadows?*

“No, my friend,” the Knight began, sadly shaking his head. “It may be classified as a book of shadows, but it was not written by any witch.”

The thought of the apocalypse terrified him, and running back to his room and opening the Bible, he tried to make comparisons between the tale he was told and the holy words in the Bible. Then the question of whether this was the real book of prophecy came to mind. What if it was true? What if the Bible was only a story and he now possessed the genuine thing?

He was a servant of God, and this book was an abomination, but there was something so authentic in the Knight's words that made him believe otherwise. He had heard many stories from people who

followed other faiths, and they believed in this book. Though he lived his life within the Catholic walls, part of him also secretly followed the Pagan path.

Was it by coincidence that the Knight came to him, trusted in him? Maybe, but he needed to keep his word, and the warnings given to him by the man who had travelled so far in order to keep the book from dire man, who desperately wanted the book for their own doings, might be proof enough that the pages within it were perilous. The King of France wanted the book and everything else the Knights possessed. The Father knew there was some power, some supernatural influence in what they owned, and this was the treasure the King undoubtedly wanted to capture.

“The power is in your hands,” he had told him, and strangely enough holding the book on open palms, a surge of power came through it and into his veins. He felt his heart race, the blood rushing through his body. He was certain his mind was only playing some kind of mental trick, but nevertheless, it scared him.

He left for Barcelona, all the while thinking of the Knight and his warning, his instincts telling him he must reach the Cathedral, and there he would find the answer to rid the book from the face of the Earth.

He departed without leaving any notification, for he was not content hearing questions, which needed to be answered with lies. Quietly, he packed as little as needed and journeyed by foot to the Vatican, where he demanded to speak to someone in high authority. It would have been a joy to communicate his tale to the Pope, but there was no chance that such a meeting would develop. He settled upon the Cardinal, who greeted him with a slight annoyance but managed to remain civil as he listened to his story.

“Yes, I do know of the book,” the Cardinal said when Father Bonnici finished his story. He held his hands together in front of him as if in prayer, then placed his fingers to his lips. He studied the priest carefully, and after a long moment of silence, he got to his feet and stepped to the door.

“And you do not have the book with you?”

“No. As I said, the book is on its way to Spain. The Knight I spoke with was quite adamant that the book be hidden, never to be found.”

“Please wait here.” The Cardinal nodded and exited the room.

Father Bonnici did not want the Cardinal or the Vatican to know he possessed the book. He had gone there only for guidance, to see what their thoughts were and if there was anything of importance that needed action.

He waited for what seemed a long time before the Cardinal finally returned. “I have spoken to the Holiness. The information you have given to me is of great magnitude. The book must not be located by anyone. If it is the real book, it must be found and delivered to the Vatican.”

“You think it is a hoax?”

“No. The Templars are quite a cunning order. They would have duplicated the book more than once, for they know the power it holds, and they, too, do not want the book to be found by the wrong hands. If the tome is on its way to Spain, maybe you can trace where it is going and ensure that you can find it and return it to the Vatican or destroy it.”

“And If I do not succeed in locating the book?”

“I am sure you will succeed.” There was something shrewd in his tone. “And you will do what you think is right. May God go with you.”

Father Bonnici left the Vatican, with a strong suspicion that the Cardinal knew the book was with him, but that was no concern. Again, he thought of what power the book held. If only he could have the text translated, then he would know exactly why the Knight and the Vatican had expressed such unease toward the tome.

It took him a week to get to Barcelona, the small ship stopping at various ports to load and unload goods along the way. With only a small bag over his shoulder, he walked to where he thought the Cathedral stood, every now and then asking for directions. An hour later, he arrived, standing in front of what he thought was the most amazing Cathedral his eyes ever seen.

The Cathedral was situated on the site of a Paleochristian basilica, the outside of the building looking sombre and decorated only with vertical buttresses. The structure was breathtaking, and he never imagined the Cathedral looking this spectacular. He had heard of its construction in memory of Saint Eulalia but never anticipated seeing something so wondrous.

The door to the cloister was open, and he walked in slowly and carefully, afraid that each step he made would cause some catastrophe within the building walls. The jitters he was feeling were more from being scared than anything else. It was like entering a doorway into another dimension, and though he knew and felt how ridiculous it all was, he could not help but feel this way.

He studied the surroundings, his eyes focusing on the geese that were enclosed in the centre of the cloister. At first, he found it to be out of the ordinary to see geese being taken care of within the confines of a church, but then he realized that they represented the thirteen tortures and the age of that poor little girl who was punished for not denouncing her faith. This was *her* church.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” a cleric asked him.

Father Bonnici, startled, turned his head to look at the young cleric. “I’m sorry. You took me by surprise. I was just thinking of Santa Eulalia.”

“Yes, it is a tragic story,” the cleric replied.

“It is the reason I am here. I would like to pay my respects.”

“Of course. Follow me.”

The cleric led him inside the Cathedral to Eulalia’s crypt, and without a further word, quietly retreated. Bonnici was struck with awe as he gazed upon the magnificent sarcophagus with gold pillars erected around the tomb and picturesque statues of angels gazing down with admiration. The four angels had a look of serenity about them, their eyes filled with warmth, their lips forming a slight smile, as if to reassure that everything was now okay.

He was taken by the beauty of it all, and for a moment, he was lost in her story as he gazed at the drawings around the wall depicting the life of the young saint. What brought him back to reality was the open gate marking a narrow entrance beneath the Cathedral. He turned around to ensure nobody was looking his way and casually approached the gate, and then walked down the winding stairs into a labyrinth of small tunnels.

The tunnels led to crypts. Some were being renovated, and others were still in the process of being constructed. There were many sealed stone caskets, some empty and others prepared, waiting to be occupied. Bonnici had to tread carefully, as the ground was muddy

from water leaking through the roof. It had to be a burst water main, and if the people here were anything like the Romans, it would take them years to fix it.

He noticed a sarcophagus with its lid partially open. Grabbing a torch from the wall, he approached it and immediately discovered it was a new piece, made only a few days ago. Passing the torch over the lid, he noticed that the etching in the stone was limited: a few Roman letters, a date, which he presumed would be the date of this person's death, and a pentagram housed inside a square with a triangle above it. There was no name or anything else to suggest who this person was.

This was what he wanted – an unmarked tomb of someone not important. He figured that this person was not well regarded, maybe due to different religious beliefs, as the pentagram was not a Catholic icon. However, many were not Christians, and there could be many reasons as to the secrecy of keeping the details hidden. Nevertheless, this was as a good hiding place as any. The lid was opened far enough for him to look in; a piece of white material had been placed over boards as a makeshift bed. He slipped his hand down one side of the sarcophagus feeling the emptiness beneath, then felt two concrete slabs that were there to support the wooden planks.

He stepped away and toward the dampened earth, where he grabbed hold of some mud in one hand while holding the book in the other and slowly rubbed the sludge its cover. He repeated the process a number of times until he felt satisfied, looking down at the book and smiling in triumph.

He cleaned one of his hands on his robe to ensure he kept the white cloth clean then carefully placed the book into the sarcophagus beside one of the concrete slabs. His work was complete, and he returned to the stairs only to find the priest on the top step.

“Forgive me,” Bonnici began apologetically. “As I saw this door opened, I thought it was another crypt to view. I am afraid I made a mess of myself.”

The young priest looked at him with a smile. “It is I who must apologize. We should keep the gate closed at all times. It is not for any tourists to see. They are actually private tombs which will be left there and possibly buried in the ground.” He placed a hand on Bonnici's shoulder. “Please, let me help you wash up.”

As they left, he took a final glance at the gate, and he felt apprehensive.

* * *

El Prat airport was buzzing, and of course, being the summer holiday season, locals were departing Spain while hordes of tourists from all over the globe had come to spend the summer here – or part of it anyway.

Gerard heard a number of British and American students frolicking like children as they waited around. It had been many years ago when he last came to visit the city, and he was amazed at how much it had grown.

The airport now contained three terminals, the third one recently built, though Al Prat was still only for domestic and European flights rather than an international airport. People wishing to fly out from Spain to America, Australia, South America, and Africa had to do so via Madrid. It was from Madrid that he caught a connecting flight to Barcelona, which took him a total of around twenty-four hours of flight time from Australia.

From his backpack, he withdrew his cell phone, switched it on, and searched for Francis' number. He hesitated for a moment before pressing the green call button, trying to think of an excuse. He was sure the stubborn son of a bitch would object to him being there, so he needed justification, and that would be difficult, as Francis was no fool. Maybe it was best to tell him the truth – well, not the exact truth, but that his reason for being there was because he, too, was intrigued and thought he may need some assistance. If that didn't work, stuff him!

He pressed the call button. There was a moment of silence before he heard the other end of the phone ring, then it was answered with an abrupt "*Hello.*"

"Francis, it's Gerard. I am here in Barcelona. Thought you might need some help."

"I didn't ask for you to come here," Gerard moved the phone away from his ear and let the old fool finish his tantrum. When he heard the phone go silent, he spoke into it softly and with a devilish smile said, "Believe me, you will need my help. I'll meet you at the cathedral around eight," and disconnected the line.

* * *

Gerard stood at the top end of Las Ramblas looking down at the long pedestrian pathway that ended where Christopher Columbus had once stood overlooking the bay. There didn't seem to be much that had changed with the texture and architecture of the city, and tourists flocked in numbers. It was a popular meeting spot as well.

Where he stood, there used to be a stream flowing outside the city walls in the sixteenth century, with convents and universities built along the riverside. Now it was a wide pathway for people to walk down toward the bay; the old convents and universities had been demolished and replaced by restaurants, banks, and souvenir shops.

Some of the sidewalk actors had not changed; he still recognized a few of them from his last visit as they prepared their makeup and clothes in readiness for a long day of urban performances. Most of them he gave much credit, as they would sit for hours on end as statuettes and only move when money was tossed into a bowl.

Gerard's favourite was the black devil, and there he was again, though this one seemed much bigger and scarier than the one he remembered. It was a good six-foot tall, and that was not counting the red horns protruding from the forehead. The wings on each side seemed to spread to a length of five feet, and the black, forked tail was easily three feet long. Gerard stared, amazed at how the man was able to control the tail, lifting it into the air and moving it from side to side. The makeup was simply amazing. His face was tinted in black, and his eyes were painted in a dark red that stood out perfectly. Yellow contact lenses pierced through when Gerard looked into them, and the eyes seemed to carry a hypnotic stare. The nose was long, and every now and then, smoke puffed from the nostrils. The whole costume was remarkably clever and quite convincing from a distance, like something out of a horror movie.

Further down, a woman was adjusting her attire before transforming herself into a statuette representing nature. She was aided by another onto a square pedestal, inhaled a last breath of cigarette smoke, and commenced her day's work. The wooden stand she stood on was green, made to look like grass, and around it tree roots grew to connect with her costume. She was the Queen of the Forest in a shape of a tree, her face a mask of wood chips; only her brown eyes could be seen. The arms were made of thick tree trunks

with small bright green leaves attached. From her head, branches grew out, also covered in leaves with exotic colourful birds perched quietly. What was most fascinating was an asp entwined around her, its head looking up and moving slowly from side to side. It was so lifelike!

Looking at his watch, he saw it was nearing nine-thirty in the morning, and the heat and humidity had already started to attack his pores. As much as he loved Europe – especially the Mediterranean – it was the humidity that he would never be able to get used to. Even the cooler days here were warm enough to wear short sleeve tops and shorts, and this morning, he could feel the sun's rays already creeping up, warning him that the day would be something that he may not be able to tolerate.

He crossed La Ramblas to head for the Cathedral, passing the famous Dali museum – something he had been wanting to do since his last visit but had never found the time. Further along, he stopped to look up at the spire, which was netted in order to complete its construction and renovation. Saint Helena was removed from her position on the spire, where she looked down upon the gothic area and surroundings of Barcelona. She had been placed in the cloister until the final renovations were completed.

Gerard entered the cloister along with a swarm of tourists, some excitedly rushing in to see the incredible manmade structure of years gone by. He casually moved toward the gift shop then suddenly stopped, a smile creasing his face at the sight of a souvenir shop inside a Cathedral. Shaking his head and not really surprised that this was all a business, he continued up a couple of steps and inside the shop.

Not knowing what he was going to buy, he browsed through the miniature plastic ornaments of the Cathedral, Eulalia's crypt, and other useless objects, and then stepped over to a rack of postcards, which he flicked through without actually looking at them. There were plates, glasses, mugs, cutlery, and books; the latter he found to be the most interesting items in the shop. He chose a book on the history of the Cathedral, paid for it, and stepped out, looking for a place to sit. He found an area opposite the geese enclosure and, settling himself on a concrete block, he opened the book and started reading, occasionally looking up to check if Francis had arrived.

* * *

“I can’t understand why you are in some agreement with him,” Mary said. How she hated that man! “Remember, he tried to kill us, right?”

“I know,” Karl replied, “but he has many contacts, and without him, we wouldn’t be here; we wouldn’t have come this far. He was the one who paid for the airfares and hotel.”

“It still doesn’t make him likeable. I do not trust him. People don’t do these things just out of politeness. He wants something.”

“Of course – he wants the book! And it seems that without me, he can’t get to it. So, what else is concerning you?”

“You know that the archangels are guardians to the watchtowers. Do you know exactly what they are?”

“Doors to the other world, right?”

“Yes, and Satan was supposed to have been cast out from one of those doors and ended up here. The Bible mentions that the devil was cast to hell. This is hell, Karl. He was sent *here*.”

“I think that is a little ridiculous, don’t you?”

“And seeing and speaking with angels is not? What about Samael? Is that ridiculous as well? This is all so strange, and I also read that there was a war in heaven and how the angels felt they were betrayed when God gave this Earth to create a human civilization.”

Karl looked puzzled. “What is your point?”

At that moment, Francis appeared. Mary stared at the man who made her stomach feel empty and squeamish. She had to turn away, as the sight of him repulsed her.

“Are we all ready to go?” he asked and turned to Mary with a wink, not waiting for an answer. He made his way to the door. “In ten minutes we’ll be at the Cathedral.”

Mary watched him, repulsed at the smile he wore as he rubbed his palms together as if a mighty treasure was within his reach.

* * *

It was over an hour before Gerard noticed Francis entering the cloister. Behind him, Karl and Mary followed. He waited and carefully gazed their way as they split in different directions looking down at their feet as if they had lost something on the ground.

Gerard reasoned that the taller one must be the man Francis had spoken about – the one who was able to find the book. Gerard had no idea how one person could manage to locate an artefact that had eluded so many before him. *What makes him so special?* he wondered.

He stared at Karl as he slowly approached him, then quickly jumped to his feet, reached for Karl's arm, and dragged him toward a mob of tourists where they were out of Francis' sight and then out of the cloister.

"Sorry, but there is a reason for all this," Gerard apologized, feeling a little embarrassed for the sudden abduction. "Francis will want to find that book tonight. I need to talk to you before then."

"Who are you?" Karl asked curiously.

"I am Francis' assistant... or that is what he thinks, anyway. I work for the Vatican, and I am trying to stop him or anyone from getting to that book. Please, you must not lead him to it. Now go before he suspects you are missing." Gerard looked at his watch. "Four pm, near the statute of Christopher Columbus at the end of the Ramblas."

Karl watched him quickly walk away and disappear within the crowd of people. He stood for a moment staring ahead of him, his mind trying to figure out the strange and short conversation. After a moment's thought, unnoticed, he casually stepped back into the cloister and walked toward Francis.

"I think we need to go below, beneath the cloister." Francis began. "These are plaques and not necessary sigils of the tombs we are looking for. There may have been a number of renovations through the years, so—"

"So maybe what we are looking for is a needle in a haystack." Karl finished off.

"But we have you." Francis grinned and patted him on the shoulder. "I am sure with your *insight* you will be able to guide us to it."

Mary appeared behind Karl, tugging at his shirt. "There are too many people here, making it a little difficult to search for anything."

"I think we will leave it for when the gates close."

"And how are we supposed to get in here after hours?" Mary spat.

"And how are we going to get beneath the cloister?" Karl added.

Francis looked around and saw a narrow wrought iron gate a few metres from him. He stepped over to it, the others following behind, and peered through the rusted bars. There were two staircases: one leading up, the other down. "I think this is the way in."

"You think we can pay off the church to allow us in there?"

"I'll be right back." Francis disappeared through the crowd.

"Heaven is still at war, Karl." Mary looked concerned. "The next war will not be fought by us. *We* may be the enemy."

Karl said nothing and thought about Gerard's words. There were too many warnings; Father Bonnici had issued a warning back at the Capuchin Crypts, the same voice as in the Roman tunnels.

"We need to go along with this for our sake. I think Francis has other plans for us after the book is found."

"*If* it is found. You can bluff your way, and he won't know it"

"You think we are doing the right thing here?"

Karl's words sounded genuine, but Mary felt something empty in them as well. "I'm afraid, Karl. I don't know what it is, but I think we should leave whatever it is alone."

A deep sigh escaped him as he nodded. "We have an appointment this afternoon, but I'm sure Francis won't let us out of his sight."

"An appointment? With whom?"

Francis approached them wearing that same devious grin Mary had seen on their way out of the hotel. "Money – the wonders it can do. The gates close at eight. We need to be here five minutes before they close. Someone will let us through."

"Perfect," Karl looked at Mary and brushed a strand of her hair away from her eyes. "Gives us time to at least do some sightseeing together."

"Ah, my friend, you stay where I can see you."

Karl had had enough, and a surge of power filtered through him. It was a rage of anger that came upon him suddenly, building within the pit of his stomach. He faced Francis, moving ever so close to him, mentally pushing him back against the iron gate. To anyone watching, it looked as though Francis had taken a step back and lost his footing, stumbling to the ground.

"Be careful. You don't want to get yourself hurt," Karl commented sarcastically. His lips were inches away from Francis' ear. "I can easily hurt you, and you know that. Don't pull your authority over me. You want the book, and I am here to help you.

Now I will give you some advice. Leave us alone, and we will meet you here before eight pm. Either that, or I'll mash your brains into a pulp and really give these tourists something to stare at!"

Francis only stared, wide eyed and shocked. It took him a moment to regain his composure, straightening his jacket and brushing off any dirt from his trousers. "Fine. Whatever you want. Just watch your back; you never know who or what is trailing behind you."

"I'll take my chances."

* * *

He had held up his head high with honour and grace as he walked out of the cloister and toward his hotel. He felt like a fool. But more than that, he had been made to look like a fool, and this concerned him.

In his room, he paced the distance between the door and the window, trying to control his anger. What annoyed him the most was that he had to let the boy take the advantage, as without him there was no way of finding the book – but to be spoken to like that and degraded in front of other people? That was total humiliation!

"You know you have to be careful."

The voice surprised him as he spun quickly on his feet toward the sound. "What do you want? And be careful of what?"

"Things are not looking good."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" Francis yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Samael. "You were supposed to help me!"

Samael laughed as he made himself comfortable on the bed. Hands cupping his head, his eyes studied Francis with some delight. "I can smell the anger in you," Samael inhaled deeply through his nose and slowly let out air which Francis saw coming out of he demon's mouth. "What help do you want from me?"

Francis stared at him in amazement. "To get the book." Frustration began to show. "And to help me be rid of that boy," he spat.

"The second no can do, but as for the book, yes, it must be found. Just think of the awesome power it will give you, the authority you will have as the ruler of the gates." Samael was quickly on his feet

and leapt in front of Francis. "Imagine God on his throne – you, Francis. You! You are the God! You will be able to control who comes and goes. You will have your own angels by your side," He placed both hands on Francis' cheeks. "The God of the occult, with magic at your fingertips. All yours, Francis. All yours!"

Samael's words both tempted and soothed him. So many years and so much time had been invested in this, and finally the reality of it all was close at hand. "How can I be sure I can trust you?"

"You have my word."

"My point entirely; a demon's word can never be counted on."

"Is that how you look upon me? A demon?"

"What else can you be? I summoned you, and I can banish you as well."

"That is the problem with you humans. The ego gets in the way of reality. It is why mankind will cease to exist. Humans themselves will end humanity."

"Tell me, what is it that's not looking good?"

"Be careful of—"

Before he could finish, Samael was unexpectedly lifted into the air, a look of surprise washing over his face followed by laughter as he realized what was happening.

Francis watched the spectacle as Samael rose higher toward the ceiling, his laughter echoing and seeming to get louder. Then, it was like fireworks as his body pushed through the ceiling and then exploded in particles of blue. Francis shielded his eyes as he turned away, and in a matter of seconds, everything was back to normal.

Samael was gone, but he needed to banish him, send him back, and if he had the equipment to do it now, he would. He never needed his help in the first place. The boy held the key, and Samael really had no part in it. Then again, there were times when the old demon had aided him in certain situations, so not all was a total loss.

His mind wandered to the boy, and it again annoyed him tremendously that he could hold such power over him. This he did not like, but he had to hold his pride if he wanted to succeed. He decided to let them enjoy an afternoon in the city, because by the end of the night, he would have the book in his hands.

“And with it comes consequences,” Samael said more to himself but loud enough for the others to hear.

“This is not our choice to make,” Michael argued. “In fact, I don’t think it is the right time.”

Gabriel stepped beside him, a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Michael, we have no other choice. It has been foretold, and you know that. It is unavoidable.”

“I still don’t think it is time.” He turned to Samael. “The balance is not right, and you know that.”

“Our friend Francis?” Samael laughed. “He is the pawn in all this.”

Michael turned to the other angels. “No, I will not buy into it. If you want war, I will be the one who will fight against you and not with you. And you, Gabriel,” Michael pointed a finger at what he considered once to be a brother. “It is true we have in our hearts a shade of darkness, but yours is getting darker with every minute that passes.”

“Now, Michael, those words are more suited to be uttered by your old friend Samael.”

Michael knew very well that he had to join them, and there was no way he was going to win this on his own. He looked at each one of them, nodded, and then disappeared.

* * *

Gerard met Karl outside the cloister of the Cathedral, and though it was two am, there were still a number of people walking about, and the humidity was not making it any easier to sleep.

“During the Roman empire in AD 343 a basilica was built here. In 985, it was destroyed by the Moors and was replaced by a Roman Cathedral, built between 1046 and 1058. A Roman chapel, the Capella de Santa Llucia, was added between 1257 and 1268, and it was later incorporated in the cloister next to the cathedral.

“Thirty years later, in 1298, construction of the gothic cathedral started under King Jaume II. During the construction of the gothic cathedral, the existing Roman building was demolished, except for the Santa Llucia chapel.

“Due to civil wars and the Black Death, which hit the city several times, construction of the cathedral progressed slowly. It took until

1460 to complete the main building. Now, not far from here is a Roman city. Most of the ancient city is now buried deep underneath today's city centre. After excavating, they found many passages, and one passage led to a dead end; a huge boulder blocked the way. Blasting this rock, they found another passage and again, this too was made impassable. Finally, after some time, they were able to access the rest of the passageways that led beneath the old Roman church. There is also a large exhibition of artefacts that were found during the excavation – jewellery, coins, ceramics, needles, and a book which mysteriously disappeared.”

“*The book?*” Karl questioned.

“Nobody can be sure, but this passageway was used by the Templars. Graham Phillips’ investigation of the Templars and their treasure found that this passageway was used in order to escape the treacherous Romans. They left their mark throughout their destinations – a Pagan symbol but not necessary anti-Christian, for they were Christian Knights. But it was found that the order existed centuries before, though they were not the Templars, but a similar religious order.”

“What has this got to do with the book?”

“They had the book and knew what it contained, knew what it could do. People claimed that Santa Eulalia knew it as well, and though only thirteen years of age, she could release the power of the book.”

“And what power might that be?” Karl asked, mystified, though something told him he did not want to hear the answer.

“You are aware the book contains a ritual,” Gerard continued, “to open the four watchtowers? Once opened, it will be the beginning of the end. Apocalypse; the war between heaven and hell. You, I, Mary and Francis are the four who have been prophesized or chosen because we have an inner power to make it happen, but they are playing us as fools. The elemental signs do not correspond to what we are. It is all a trick, and it has been so for centuries.”

“We are being used to open the gates?”

“Yes. That’s why the Vatican wants the book – because of the destruction it can cause. The book also describes how man himself will destroy the Earth by creating false gods. This has not been proven, but the four books do exist, and they are not copies, as

people believe they are. Each book represents an element, and with each element is the ritual for the corresponding watchtower.

“I am a servant of the Vatican, though I am not ordained, but I have sworn to protect the books from getting into the wrong hands. It is why I need to find it now before Francis gets hold of it.”

“We don’t really know that the book is here. It may have well disappeared.”

He studied Karl’s face, the silence a little uncomfortable, but he did feel that slight push in his mind telling him Karl was reading his thoughts.

And indeed Karl was. He needed to know if what he was hearing was true. It was easy for him to go in; there were no barriers.

“I am not hiding anything. Read my whole life if you care to.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. You are nothing like Francis.”

“I take that as a compliment. We must not let that book be found. As you have the ability to trace the book, you must also have the ability to trick Francis. You are much stronger than him, and you know how to block him from entering your thoughts. Trick him to think the book is somewhere else, and I will do the rest.”

“And your plans?”

“My plans are my own and it is best you do not get involved. You do your part and then leave.”

“How much of a disaster can these books cause?” The question had already been answered, but he couldn’t quite get a grip on how supernatural beings could take over the world. It sounded too much like a movie. “Sorry, but I just find it hard to believe all of this.”

“Well, it isn’t something you hear on a daily basis, and it isn’t something that can be taken lightheartedly either. People nowadays are too involved in their own fast-paced lifestyle – work, money, family. It is a fact of life in our age that the younger generations are oblivious to facts that pertain to the reality of their lives. What I mean by that is, there are a number of things in life that few know about, and even when they do hear about it, they can’t understand it. We live in a society where the words, *seeing is believing*, are a common philosophy. For some, that is all that matters, and sometimes it is best to believe that way.”

“But you seem to be open-minded to all that is happening,” Karl said, taking a liking to Gerard. He appeared to be well in control of

his thoughts and life, had a sense of security, and knew his priorities, though there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Karl felt a little guilty reading his thoughts, but he couldn't help but sense something dark.

"I know what you're trying to look for, and whether you find it or not, it will not make a difference."

"I don't follow you."

"There is an area in our minds, a second sense, that can see the future of our existence. I know mine is bleak, and it is something I cannot avoid. If I have to die to protect the future of mankind, then so be it."

"But by knowing the future, you can change it."

"Yes, but sometimes there is nothing one can do – or should do. You haven't read me properly, have you?"

Karl raised his eyebrows in question.

"The fourth book is in Malta."⁴

⁴ Authors Note: Karl will continue the story from here. He can describe the events as he saw them happening. I will sit back, relax, and listen to his final tale, even though I have heard his story before. It still mesmerizes me, and I find it not only fascinating, but at times, quite incredible. I will not say much more on the matter except to ask you to keep an open mind. I will return later to conclude the story. Remember, the end is only the beginning...

THE ABSOLUTE

I told Mary everything that transpired between Gerard and myself. I also learned that Gerard had other connections: the mafia and the Vatican. Gerard had plans, and for our safety, we had to make sure that Mary and I were out of there before the war started.

What scared me a little was something else I saw, and whether this was a figment of Gerard's imagination or real, the horrifying vision was not one I would want to welcome in my dreams, let alone confront in reality. If this was all going to happen, I could easily evade the fight, but the other? Well, I will get to that later.

* * *

Francis was one person who needed taken care of, and though I knew I had an advantage over him and I could sense he was a little afraid of me, I wasn't sure how to remedy the problem. As Gerard mentioned, he would take care of him as long as Mary and I were out of the way.

We met Francis in the lobby at four forty-five that afternoon, and his first question to me was, "Where did you spend the afternoon?"

"Like any other tourist, seeing the sights," I answered and walked out into the street. Mary followed as I heard her whisper some harsh words directed at Francis. The stubborn son of a bitch also tried again to get into my mind, as he felt there was something I was not going to tell him. He simply could not grasp that he would never be able to get inside, no matter how hard he tried. I felt him pushing, and this brought a smile to my face, as I could feel the strength in him building and desperately searching for a way in.

All I needed to do was push back. A little effort was all it required to send him falling on his ass, and that was exactly what I did. I didn't look back, though, and grabbing Mary's hand, I led her to the cathedral.

She glanced behind her and laughed. "You did that?"

“I want you to listen to me, and please don’t ask me questions, as we don’t have much time.”

“This isn’t going to be good, is it?”

“I want you to do whatever I tell you. Something is going to go down, and we don’t want to be in the middle of it.” I looked at her and considered leaving her behind altogether.

“Oh no! You are not going to do that,” she argued. “I don’t need to get into your head to know what you’re thinking.”

“You have no idea what dangers hide around the corner, and with you on crutches, it may put you at risk.”

“You think I can’t handle myself?”

“Please, Mary,” I started, my tone pleading with her. “We don’t have time for arguments.” She suddenly dropped one of her clutches, her head bending forward wincing in pain. Behind her, I saw Francis wearing a grin as he approached us.

“He probably knows what we are talking about,” I said quickly, seeing Francis approaching us. “He may have already read your mind without you knowing.”

“I am a stubborn man and can’t learn to leave well enough alone,” Francis said, patting me on the back. He looked me in the eyes, giving me a cold warning, then led the way to the cathedral.

He had something in mind; I felt it, though I was not going to attempt to read his thoughts. I found it was causing me problems. Every time I did so, my eyes began to ache, and a sharp, stabbing pain throbbed on one side of my head. It only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to make me wince.

We reached the cathedral and waited as the people slowly left the sanctum of the cloister. There were others trying to get in, but the security person was waving them away and telling them they were closing. We waited for another twenty-five minutes before the gate was closed and locked, and then another ten minutes before a monk greeted us at the gate.

I thought of Gerard, wondering if he was on his way, though something told me he was already here.

We followed the monk to the entrance of the cathedral, and I was astounded by the beauty of the church, but unfortunately I wasn’t there to admire it. We followed him down the aisle and through a side door that led us outside to the cloister. He was about to leave us when Francis asked him to open the gate that led beneath the cloister.

“I am sorry, but that area is restricted.”

“What do you mean restricted? We were given permission to go down there!” Francis roared. I saw his nerves taking hold of his body, and his fists clenched. I quickly stepped between the two, a little afraid of what the crazy son of a bitch would do.

At that moment, Gerard approached, placing a hand on the priest’s shoulder and uttering something in Spanish. The priest glared at Francis, then turned to open the gate.

“What the hell did you tell that priest?” Francis ordered.

Gerard ignored him as he disappeared through the open gate and down the stairs.

“I think you better forget about what he said and follow them down,” I muttered, not really caring much about the man anymore. He was starting to repulse me.

The gate we walked through was quite narrow – a set of stairs leading up and another going down. There was an office at the first door we came across, and looking through the glass window I saw it contained maps, hardhats, and torches strewn everywhere. My guess was that they were in the process of constructing an underground crypt, and the office belonged to a project manager.

We continued down the spiral staircase, maybe two more flights, before we reached the bottom. Francis was cursing about the fact that it was too dark and he could easily have missed a step and fallen, breaking his leg. *If only it was true*, I thought. *But then again, he would have to take us down with him.*

The priest reached for a light switch, and the whole crypt came to life. Empty coffins of stone lined one side of the wall, and sealed coffins were scattered down toward the end of the crypt. I had no idea what was being done down here, but it felt quite eerie. I tuned in, trying to pick up some sound, some voices, but nothing came.

“Try to find the sigil on those coffins,” Francis ordered, pointing a finger toward the sealed tombs.

Mary shook her head in disgust, and I smiled, for it was not worth wasting precious breath on shit. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Gerard looking at me and didn’t know if he was trying to message me or if it was a look of caution.

I think it was the latter, as he did warn me that something was going to go down, possibly taking him with it. *“Tell me when we need to run for cover,”* I sent to his mind, and he nodded.

We combed every coffin we could find and found no trace of the sigil. Francis, with a demanding military tone, cursed and questioned my accuracy about the sigil. I was ready to punch him and throw him into one of the opened tombs, but instead I regained my composure and approached him and calmly said, “I never told you that anything I hear and see is fact. Come to think of it, the *Book of Secrets* could well be a joke.”

Francis laughed, knowing that was not so. Then he suddenly looked around him in wonder. “Where the hell is Gerard?”

Mary and I also looked around and saw no trace of him, but something told me to slowly back away. Gerard was at the stairs letting them in. I looked behind me; a few feet away was an open crypt. I grabbed her without warning, letting the clutches fall to the ground.

“Karl, what are you doing?” she asked, a little surprised and annoyed at the same time.

“We need to get under cover. We need to hide.” I pulled her toward the tomb and saw that it had the remains of a body in it. At first, I thought of pushing Mary inside but decided it would be a mistake. We hid behind it and there, right in front of me was the sigil.

“Do you see that?” I asked, pointing to the etching on the side of the sarcophagus. Mary took a closer look and after a few seconds realized what she was looking at.

I was about to reach inside and search the coffin, but it was then I heard the pounding of feet running down the stairs. In an instant, there were men holding Francis at gunpoint. There were at least seven of them, two I recognized from my hotel in Rome.

Gerard called out for us, and I slowly got to my feet and stepped to where Mary’s crutches lay. I picked them up and handed them to her. “I think I found it.”

I pushed the bones around, apologizing silently for disturbing whoever it was resting there, and to my surprise, I received an answer.

“No apology needed. I am Renaud, one of the last Templars. It is why the book was placed inside my coffin. The Book of Secrets must remain with the Knights.”

My head started to hurt as I searched the coffin and found nothing.

“*Look underneath*,” the voice of Renaud said.

There was a cavity beneath the board the bones were laying on. I managed to easily break the wood, which was brittle with age. Gerard came to my side and helped me break the remaining pieces, and there in a corner was something wrapped in black cloth.

I turned to look at Francis and saw the hatred building in his eyes. I knew from the look he gave me that he was up to something. “I may be able to kill you with just one thought,” I said to him.

“Then we will see who comes out the winner.” A grin was painted on his face. “I know I am no match for you, boy, but there are other ways to win a fight.”

His head turned to the gunmen, and quickly I realized his intention, but it was too late, as I watched the guns being raised and aimed toward Gerard and Mary.

“I always wondered why I could never get inside that brain of yours,” Francis said to Gerard. “So here we are, the four who are supposed to open the gates of heaven.”

“Enough of this bullshit, Francis,” I said, a little irritated and fed up. “You want the book, I’ll give it to you.” I reached in and grabbed hold of the *Book of Secrets*, if indeed it was the book. Upon touching it, I felt a surge of electricity running through me and images flashing past me like a speeding train. I couldn’t quite capture any of the scenes that were quickly displaying in my mind, but I did feel its power, and Francis saw it too.

“The book, my boy,” Francis said, motioning with his hand for me to toss him the book.

I wasn’t going to make it that easy for him. In fact, I had had enough of the whole game. I tossed the book in the air in the direction where Francis stood, watching him reach out with his hands in readiness to catch the tome, and in that instant, his mind was free to enter. I pushed so hard that he flew into the wall, leaving blood running down his nose.

The other men were now free to think for themselves. There was a little confusion settling in, but they were clear enough to finish the job they were hired to do.

I turned away. There was little sound, as the guns were silenced, but I knew they had done their job.

Gerard picked up the tome and studied it, but his expression was not one of delight. “Do you know how many problems this book can cause?”

“May I?” I nodded toward the book, and he handed it to me without a word. “And this book has the ability to begin the war on Earth?”

“Angels may be around us to guide us. Some of us believe we have a guardian angel. But they also have a purpose, and without us, they are nothing. Isn’t that so?”

I watched the men carry Francis’ body up the stairs, not caring where they were taking him. Then, I suddenly wondered if his question was directed to me or not. Puzzled, I looked at Gerard as he continued. “You know they are real, Karl, but they can also be deceiving.”

The crypt was glowing, shimmering in blue light, and it was Michael I saw first. Three others followed, then Samael to the far right of me. It was a little funny, as they looked like they were in a line-up, and there we were, ready to pinpoint the culprits.

Gerard stepped close to Uriel and bowed his head in disappointment. “Since I was a child, I have heard and seen Uriel, believing every word he had to say. In fact, he was preparing me in hopes I would find the book, but of course I couldn’t do it on my own. Yes, there was a prophecy that four were needed to open the watchtowers, but the chosen four were a mistake.”

Uriel came close to me, his eyes glaring, looking through every pore of my body. There seemed to be something sinister about him, and it made my flesh crawl. I could see he sensed my fear and he backed off a little, and then turned to the others. “Yes, Gerard, you may be right there. We didn’t need four after all – only one.”

I knew he was talking about me and built the courage to speak out. “I will not have anything to do with opening the gates.”

“You do not have a say in it.” It was Samael talking now. “You have no idea what it is like for all of us to live like this for eternity. This was not our choice. We were forced to live hidden amongst humans, and now it is our time to live free.”

“No, Samael, your time has not come. None of our times has come, and they never will.” Michael looked at me. “We can’t survive, and you know that. We were not made to live in this land.”

“Then why was I shunned into this land?” Samael roared.

“It was your punishment.” Michael answered him softly.

“The Knights took extreme care to keep these tomes hidden,” Gerard began. “This book will never see human eyes again.” From his pocket, he fished a lighter and without hesitation placed the flame to the ancient pages. He held the book in front of him, watching the flames eat the centuries of information.

I heard Mary gasp and even I let out a huff of breath myself. Samael roared again with sheer anger, conjuring a wind, which pressed us against the stone wall. Gabriel hissed, and then vanished with the others. Only Michael remained.

I said nothing to him, but my eyes betrayed the disappointment I felt.

“I never lied to you, Karl. I only kept a certain truth from you. I want you to know that.”

I kept quiet, for I didn’t know what to say. My head was hurting, and something made me turn and look inside the coffin where the book had been found.

“*He speaks the truth,*” the voice said. “*Michael is one of the guardians, a good angel. Learn his story, and you will see.*”

The pain was getting worse, and suddenly I bent forward and began retching. My chest hurt as if it wanted to explode. I collapsed onto the cold ground, finding it difficult to catch my breath. Mary came to me, letting her crutches go and dropped beside me.

“Slowly, deep breaths,” she was saying, and listening to her, I managed to take in a breath, which calmed me down. When I looked up again, Michael was gone, and all was quiet. The *Book of Secrets* was burnt to ashes, and celebrants were scrubbing away the blood on the wall where Francis had been shot. It was funny that I had not noticed them come down.

An urn was handed to Gerard, and he carefully collected the ashes and placed them inside. “I think you two will be okay. I need to get this urn to Rome. Would be nice if you can accompany me. I’m sure the Vatican will be pleased to see you.”

“After we spend a few days in Barcelona. I think we need some time out.” Mary kissed me on the forehead, and she was right. I wanted to see the sights of this city.

When I turned back to Gerard, he was no longer there.

THE REMNANT ⊕ THE BEAST

So, what do you think? Crazy, unbelievable, strange, or maybe psychologically insane? Yes, the latter would fit perfectly well – who in their right mind would go on a treasure hunt for something that may not exist, not to mention the power I possessed? Necromancy, is that what they call it? Being able to communicate with the dead. Hmm... as scary as that is, who would believe in this day and age that people could actually talk to the dead?

“I see dead people.” I could never forget those words in that terrific scene with the little boy, as he stood there, frightened and shocked, uttering those words to Bruce Willis. The difference with me was I never *saw* dead people, but I did feel them, and they spoke to me.

“I speak to dead people...”

Now, let me recap and tell you things that the author may have missed. We have to keep our eyes on these writers, you know – one thing said and a different thing written!

Yes, I did suddenly give up my career as a fireman and pursue an adventure, although I had no idea what was to come. At first, I was reluctant to do it, as I had created my comfort zone, and leaving it would open up a feeling of insecurity. But I needed it, and even though the shit seemed to be flung my way, I have not regretted the decision of change.

My therapist, I must admit, made things worse for me – that is what I think anyway. My problems were life, and deep within me, I knew I needed to do something to change the way I was feeling and stop going back to that comfort zone. It may have been the reason I was depressed and confused. In fact, I was scared to step out of it. Back then, the therapist seemed to be a good idea. How wrong I was! That money-hungry son of a bitch!

It was also my Paganism that helped me a little through the hard times, and of course my friends – especially Mary, but I’ll come to her in due course. Paganism was a path I decided to follow when I

was a teenager. I remember my mother and I discussing topics such as hauntings, ghosts, rituals, and the occult – strange discussions for a fourteen-year-old to have with his mother. I remember she once told me how special I was. At first, I thought they were words any parent would say to their children just to make them feel good, but I later found out that it wasn't like that at all. Yes, I was special to her; I was an only child, but what she meant was that I carried a gift that I would learn to use in time.

Now this intrigued me, for what power could I possibly possess?

It was a few nights later that I experienced my first horrific message. I lay in bed, so sure that I was awake, and being choked by cold hands that enveloped my throat. I was thrashing my legs, my feet kicking the blankets off me, and my arms desperately trying to grab hold of something that wasn't there.

I couldn't find my voice, and come to think of it, I sounded like a puppy dog whimpering. It finally ended and I saw a dark figure flash in front of me and then disappear. I quickly sat up in bed, my hands touching my throat and feeling the skin slowly warm back up. Then I noticed it – four black finger marks on the wall above my head that left a dragging imprint. First, I held my hands up and studied them, seeing no coloration on the tips of my fingers. Then, I reached up and carefully touched the fingerprints, and to my surprise, they were icy cold.

I must have jumped off the bed and straight into my parents' room within a second. White as a bleached sheet and gasping for air, I explained the incident. Dad moaned for waking him up at six am, and Mum smiled, telling me it was all a dream. When I dragged her out of bed to show her the marks on the wall, she looked at me, and her eyes told me that it definitely was no dream. She didn't say a word out loud, but I clearly read it in her mind. I actually *heard* it!

For two days, my mother scrubbed at the wall. Every now and then, I would take over, for the damned prints would not come off, even though the white paint did. It was fascinating how the black marks stayed there but the coat of paint behind it disappeared.

My mother, seeing that it was not doing any good, decided one night to do a ritual while my father was away. Dad never believed in such things and thought religion was only a way to start wars. Mum always kept her Paganism beliefs to herself, and it was after this incident that she opened herself up to me and began giving me

lessons on the art of Wicca. But first, she had to remove what I called *the remnant of the beast* – what else could it have been?

I can't recall exactly what she did, but I do clearly remember that she asked me to bathe and scrub myself from head to toe, and while I was doing that, she was preparing a room for the ritual. There were so many questions I wanted to ask her as I stood in the doorway staring down at a large pentagram. I knew what it was, but I had no idea what was going to happen. She lit candles, placing them at each cardinal point, and then she motioned me to sit in the middle, where I smelled burning herbal incense.

Now comes the scary part. She took my hand and placed it over a metal bowl, and with the other she showed me a needle, explaining that she needed a few drops of my blood to mix with the herbs and other strange things that sat inside the bowl. The warmth in her smile told me everything was going to be okay, so instead of pulling my hand away I built up the courage to accept the pin that slowly found its way into my skin. I did wince at the pain, but it really wasn't as bad as I thought. Squeezing my finger, we both watched the blood drip onto the herbs. Kissing the tiny puncture, she told me to sit still and watch the remainder of the ritual.

This was one side of my mother I never knew about, and in a way, it excited me. She was a Catholic and tried to attend Mass on a regular basis, but this? Wow! It was like I was in a scene from a movie! She chanted and called upon the elements. She waved her athame (back then it was a knife to me; I never knew the difference), and then started grinding the ingredients inside the bowl. It took no more than twenty minutes for the ritual to end, but it wasn't over yet. She handed me the brush and the bowl and told me to smudge what was now powdered herbs onto the black markings with all the strength I had. I did as I was instructed and scrubbed like I wanted to make a large hole in the wall, hearing her chant as I worked. Within minutes, and after a little sweating on my part, I noticed that the unearthly markings had finally vanished.

From that moment on, every time I saw my mother's face, I looked upon her as a witch.

"It is time," she had said to me and finally told me of my ancestors.

There had been generations of male witches, and I was one of them – a descendant from the Knights of Malta. Funny, because I could cope with the thought of being a witch, but my ancestors as Knights? I couldn't help but laugh, and whether it was nerves after going through this horrific episode or if it was the start of my psychological disturbances, I don't know, but that is one day I have never forgotten.

So, from then until now, what happened?

There were a number of supernatural incidents that occurred throughout my teenage years, and my mother was always there to guide me. We never spoke about it outside the house, and neither did we mention anything to my father.

It was the day she died that I seemed to lose all sense of – I don't know – everything? Emotions, feelings...? It was strange; like part of me died with her. I stopped practicing The Craft, as I felt it was not worth it anymore. My mentor wasn't there to guide me, and without her, it was a complete loss. I found that I had to force myself to live, and if I didn't, there was nothing left to live for. Yes, those words do sound like they are coming from a mental patient, don't they?

I only experienced a couple of strange things after Mum passed away, but nothing that left me crippled mentally; strange shadows here and there, a voice every now and then, which I usually ignored, but there were always visions when I was asleep. Call them dreams, call them whatever you want, but they were always the same theme; Knights, medieval times... and angels.

Again, after a while, even these stopped, and it seemed I was back to living a normal life with no supernatural events, no dreams, no nothing. And I started missing it. Talk about being confused!

Mary was always there for support, and it was she who encouraged me to apply for the Fire Brigade, a career I never ever dreamt of getting into. But I did it, and the first four years were excellent, fun, and adventurous – not that I went and battled numerous fires or anything. In fact, in four years, I was called out to only six actual fires – other hundred or so were false alarms or garbage fires that may have been started by cigarettes.

Then came the car accidents. There were a few of those in my career, which was when depression really started to set in. I didn't

want part of it anymore, especially when I saw a twelve-year-old old girl mangled in the back seat. No seatbelt!

That was when I started seeing the shrink and slowly returned to Paganism. As I mentioned, the therapy was only money being thrown away, for I didn't feel it was helping at all, and it was Mary who pushed me to return to Paganism.

It all started again – the dreams, the Knights, and of course, some dark secret about a book. But like I always did, I thought no further of it and let the dreams fade, only they wouldn't stop this time. It was like a television series being aired in my mind. At one point, I thought back to my mother and what she had told me many years before. Could it possibly be true that I still had powers and they were ready to be unleashed? The Knights, my ancestors, were they trying to communicate with me through my dreams?

Get a grip on yourself!

I nearly threw myself against a wall hoping I would snap out of these ridiculous thoughts. Not long after that, the unbelievable happened, and if there was ever a time for me to drive myself to an asylum, it was then. But before I get to that, this was how it all came about.

* * *

Now, I do hope that people reading this understand that society is ruled by a number of influential bodies: political parties, religion, etc., and society seems to follow these groups (Clubs? Sects? Whatever you want to call them). I do not want to go in detail over the problems these bodies have, but what does annoy me is the fact that religion shuns the gay community and looks upon them as taboo, evil, and many other descriptions, which I truly find offensive and will not mention here.

I think the other problem that grew within me was the fact that when my mother passed away, my father organized a Catholic burial. I did the right thing by my dad and went to confession – ‘making the mistake of confessing that I was gay. After a moment's silence, the words spoken to me were ones that made me think twice about ever confessing to a priest again.

I was sick; mentally ill, and in desperate need of help. I wasn't there for my own personal comfort – not that the priest made me feel

welcome there. On the contrary, I wanted out of that confessional as soon as possible. I was there for my mother; no one else seemed to dwell on my homosexuality, except the priest, which annoyed me immensely. “You can still be healed,” he said. “For your mother who looks down upon you—”

That was it. I stood up and before I left I said, “You should look in your own back yard.”

I sat listening to the funeral service and thinking how alone I was. Yes, I had friends, but there was something missing. The thought of being gay and judged for being what I was hurt me. I even read about how parents tried to have their children brainwashed into believing they were not gay. We don’t choose this life. It is what we are from the day we are born. But I shall not go further with this, as it aggravates me to a point where my blood starts to boil!

Anyway, it was the loneliness that made me think of a spell. In fact, I remembered watching the movie *Practical Magic*, and it was from there that I got the idea. I didn’t really expect anything would come from it, but I thought I would give it a go. I cast it in the hope that I would meet the person of my dreams.

I put all my energy into believing that somebody would come, but in truth, I never really thought it would happen. Years went by, and nobody entered my life, apart from the occasional one-night stands, and that was when I first encountered Samael, although I didn’t know who he really was then.

Not long after seeing Samael, Michael came into my life. Now this is when everything started changing. I truly believed I was going mad! There I was exchanging words with an archangel, making love to a being who in this day and age is believed to be a myth. Worse, I found out Samael was the bloody devil! I think my childhood nightmares came to me all at once.

It all sounds crazy, but I didn’t know at the time that there was a hidden meaning to everything that had and would happen. I am sure you have guessed the outcome.

My spell to bring a lover to me brought Michael.

Francis’ spell to conjure Samael actually conjured Raphael.

Gerard had Gabriel conjured when he was a child.

And Mary accidentally brought Uriel in through her readings and contacts as a fortuneteller.

There is no significance to who conjured whom, and though it is stated that the elemental sign is important to the ritual outlined in the *Book of Secrets*, it is not necessarily a requirement that we need to correspond accurately with the archangel; therefore, being a Piscean doesn't mean I have to relate to the archangel with the same corresponding sign.

For thousands of years, the angels have tried to find a way to return to Earth and make it their home. My dreams were warnings, just like the many warnings I heard throughout my expedition. They, the archangels, needed me just as Francis needed me, for I was their strongest link. Michael gave me the boost I needed to awaken powers my mother believed I had. But all this was being manipulated. We were being used, and Gerard was the only person who knew of the consequences and the truth behind the *Book of Secrets*. Francis also had an idea, but his hunger for authority was the only thing he cared for, and Samael had done an excellent job to make him believe he would control the gates that separated the real from the unreal.

They all knew that Gerard would try to stop anyone from finding where the book lay hidden, and the archangels could not do anything to stop him. If they tried, it was written that their wings would be clipped and they would forever live in torment, but Gabriel, being the hardheaded one didn't want to believe it. He so longed to live on the Earth that he rightly believed was his.

You read what happened to him.

They had the power to make us go crazy, to make us see things that weren't real. We fought against things that were fragments of our imagination, planted there by Samael and friends. But we succeeded, like man succeeded before us hundreds of years ago, and again before that.

It was Michael, though, who actually went against their decision and tried to persuade them to change their minds. He knew his words would be useless and so he came to me.

Whatever the book contained, the other three volumes were of no use now. A quarter of the formula was now ashes, and without it, the watchtowers would remain closed. It was a comfort to know that, but I still cannot be sure if the books did have the power to open these gates, and part of me was curious to know...

Unfortunately, my love for Michael aches. I miss him in a way that leaves an emptiness in me that can never be filled. I look upon

the past events as a story now. I even stopped believing in Michael, as much as it hurt. What I witnessed then were memories of pain now, and I longed to forget them.

I never saw or heard from Michael again.

Until...

ÈPILOGUE

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

He was back at work. Rome and Barcelona were now a memory, along with Gerard and Francis, and Mary had decided to visit her family in Adelaide. He couldn't say for sure whether the decision to return to work was a good idea or not, but it was work, and he was lucky that he was able to get his job back – with the help of the shrink, no less.

To be home was the most wonderful thing that could ever happen. His body ached, his head hurt, and he needed something to clear his lungs from all the toxic fumes he had been breathing. It was a happy ending, though. The child survived, but he couldn't quite understand why the boy's parents left a ten-year-old child alone at home, unsupervised.

He thought of how he held the boy, his strong arms wrapped around the tiny body, shielding him from the smoke and flames. Once outside, he ran straight to the awaiting ambulance, where he handed the boy to the paramedics and watched as one masked him with oxygen while the other gently laid him on a bed inside the vehicle.

Without warning, Karl began coughing uncontrollably, his chest hurting a little. He was suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. The ambulance driver approached him and led him to the rear of the vehicle where the boy was sitting up looking at him. The mask was suddenly on Karl's face, and he inhaled deeply, feeling the clean air passing through his lungs. The coughing slowly ceased, and it was a relief he greatly welcomed, though a headache was developing, and all he wanted to do now was clean himself up and crawl into bed.

"You don't look too well, mister," the boy said.

Karl looked at the boy and didn't know whether to smile or be stern, but that look of innocence told him the latter was impossible to do. "Yeah, I don't feel well at all. What about you? How are you doing?"

“I’m okay. I don’t think Mum and Dad are going to be happy when they see that.” He pointed to the partially destroyed house.

“Maybe it will teach them a lesson about not leaving you alone and the oven unattended.”

He was now at home, stripped down to his boxer shorts, having collapsed on the sofa, his mind wandering to the events that led to the house fire in Richmond. The little boy reminded him of his own son, not as young but still a child just the same. Shaking his head in disbelief, Karl found it difficult to believe that some do not properly value a child’s life. It was careless of adults to put themselves ahead of a ten-year-old boy. Whatever reasons these people had to leave this child alone, it was just unreservedly selfish.

The coughing resurfaced, and for a good minute, he could not control the fit. He bent over and covered his mouth in order to stop any saliva from leaking out. Once it subsided, he fell back on the couch and closed his eyes, his breathing slow but deep.

The odour of smoke lingered on him, and he longed to take a warm bath, but the lack of strength denied him the pleasure. Instead, he willed himself onto his feet and dragged himself to the bedroom. He stopped at the foot of the bed, suddenly finding it lonely to be in a room he once shared with Michael. He still couldn’t explain the logic of what happened or why he died. Pneumonia was the cause, but it still didn’t explain how it had happened so swiftly.

He knew the dangers of the illness; the lungs becoming inflamed and flooded with fluid; coughing, chest pains, and fever. *Similar to the symptoms you’re experiencing now, Karl*, he thought to himself. For weeks, he pondered over this, and his mind was not satisfied with any of the results. The most difficult aspect of it all was that he had to accept the fact that Michael was dead.

He fell onto the bed, arms outstretched, and just as he was about to close his eyes, he looked toward the dresser, suddenly thinking that he never emptied out Michael’s drawer. In a way, he didn’t want to, and in the last few weeks, the idea of taking on this task was something he avoided and felt uncomfortable doing. There weren’t many of his belongings there; some weekend clothing – jeans and shorts, a few shirts, and a couple of pairs of underwear. It was the drawer that he never ventured near, the one where Michael used to toss in his wallet and other valuables that he claimed to be private.

Off the bed, Karl stepped over to the dresser and reached for the drawer handle. There actually weren't many items inside – a pen, a Swiss watch, a notepad, and a leather-bound book. The latter interested him, and he carefully picked it up and sat on the edge of the bed staring at the blank cover.

It was a diary; the *Book of Angels*.

He couldn't remember seeing it the last time he looked.

An angel is a pure spirit created by God. Old Testament theology included the belief in angels: the name applied to certain spiritual beings or intelligences of heavenly residence, employed by God as the ministers of His will. Although the word "angel" in the Bible, meaning a messenger, nearly always applies to heavenly beings, it can occasionally apply to human messengers. Malachi himself said a priest was a messenger (malak) of the LORD of hosts (Malachi 2:7), and in the Book of Revelation, the elders of the seven churches of Asia were called angels (1:20; 2:1, etc.). But when we meet messengers doing supernatural things, there is no doubt they are heavenly beings – God's messengers, working for Him and for the ultimate benefit of mankind.

The Creator Himself is so powerful and glorious that He cannot be approached in person by human beings. He alone "hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto: whom no man hath seen, nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). Angels do not have man's shortcomings and can therefore act for God and represent Him when communicating with men and women. They bridge the huge gap between the holiness and perfection of God in heaven and the shortcomings of dying people on this planet.

He skipped a number of pages and came across a chapter, which stopped him dead in his tracks: *The Book for the Chosen*. He read this out loud as he slowly turned the pages.

His mortal life as the chosen one will guide him through to each corner of the world, to learn the secrets of the watchtowers that keep the living and the spirit world apart. He will descend upon the living when the time is right and will do what is necessary of him.

This was what I was told to believe in.

Although I never knew my parents and they were taken from me when I was a child, I still feel that I had known them very well, especially my father, who I saw to be a King among Kings. I wanted to be like him and told him this, and his reply was that the time will soon enough come for me.

I never understood what the word Druid meant or who they were, but as my father was one, I saw that they had to be great people, and I being a Druid too was exciting and fascinating.

The time came when I was initiated into the Druid's circle, and I could see my father's face so proud of me. I only spent a short time with him before he died, though I can always feel his presence around me. I would always know he was with me whenever I saw a blue haze; that was their shimmer when they came and left.

After my many years of travelling and education, I fell ill to the same sickness that enveloped my mother and father and unfortunately, the doctors could do nothing to aid me. All believed that this was my time; I, the chosen one, will finally be reborn!

I probably only had hours to live, yet I still found strength to write this entry. The people had begun to create the biggest ceremony ever witnessed, and I started feeling scared and alone. That was when my father appeared to me.

“Don't be scared. Unfortunately, it is our curse. Death is only the beginning for you, Michaelio.” He touched my cheek, and until this very day, that tingle I felt throughout my body was never forgotten. “You will not remember much of this life, and only what is important will remain with you.”

These words I heard before, and it is the reason why I write in this journal. How I will come to get hold of this book again, I don't know, but I shall ask that it will be held to my heart with both of my hands resting on it.

So here I lay as a mortal, a Druid, my life on this Earth created in 1276. It is now June 12, 1306, and it will be on this day that I die.”

“That can't be,” Karl said out loud, shaking his head. He let out a nervous laugh as he stared at the dates. “No, it definitely can't be true.” He reread the last paragraph, and in his mind counted the years that had elapsed – 700 of them!

He read on.

It is August 12, 1306, and here I am in a strange land holding onto the journal. I remember speaking with my father, him telling me about the adventures that were in store for me. The journal told me that I died in the month of June, and here it was now August. The two months were spent with my father educating me, but there was one thing I had to get a firm grip on, and that was that fact that I had become immortal! This was my destiny! I couldn't remember much when I was a human, but what I held in my heart did surface to the mind, and one of them was Carmelo.

So, this is where it all starts, daunting but exciting. I was in the land of the Templars, and Philip the Fair had been hunting the Templars in order to arrest them and later to be tortured into admitting Heresy in the Order. Philip, who seized the treasury and broke up the monastic banking system, was jealous of the Templars' wealth and power and sought to control it for himself. Little did he know that Carmelo had a plan to scatter the most priceless treasure they had in hand.⁵

I joined the Knights in their aid to hide the treasure but as time went on, Philip the Fair had already captured most of the Knights. There were only five of us left, and it was now October 13, black Friday. It was on this day that Philip tortured the men, killed them, and finally had possession of all the money. To him, the Templars were no more, though he did know of the missing swords with their embedded jewels of Gaaden and the Book of Secrets that held magical powers over the elements and watchtowers. This was the treasure he was after, but never would he get his hands on them. As the watchtowers were currently open, all Philip needed were the artefacts and the books to enable him to carry the most frightening power within the world of the occult.

The four Knights departed separately in order to hide the artefacts, and I was their spiritual guide and also the one who would know and hold the secrets to the books. I made sure that each of the

⁵ Author's Note: The events depicted here are fictional and do not resemble any truth, whether fact or fiction about the Knights of Templar and Philip the Fair. The Jewels of Gaaden is a work of fiction and does not resemble any artefact in existence.

Knights travelled safely to their destinations, a place where each were destined to live out their lives.

The first Knight arrived in Malta, where he strolled toward the caves of Ghar Hasan. There I met him and conducted the Water ritual to ensure the Watchtower of the West would remain closed. I assisted the other three Knights with their rituals – Air for the East, South being Fire, and North being Earth. For seventeen years, they stood guard over the artefacts and I over them – especially Arsando, who I spent quite a bit of time with in Malta – until the time came for their heroism, dedication, and trust to finally end.

It is now 1692, the year of the Salem Witch trials, and I have to say how saddened I was to see such foolishness; people being accused of witchcraft! I arrived here in 1690, and talk of the devil living amongst the community had already begun, though the accusations have not started yet.

Epileptic fits, sour milk, rancid dough, and even sexual activities were being spoken of as “The Evil” residing in Salem. People falling ill and sweating, pins and needles in the arm, stabbing chest pains, nausea and vomiting – all these attributed to witchcraft, and it had to be stopped!

Janine O’Brien was the girl I was interested in – a sixteen-year-old who did possess a gift, not of evil, but of nature’s goodness. Her talent was to heal through nature; her knowledge of medicinal herbs was very great. But unfortunately, there wasn’t much I could do to stop her from being burned.

Her own mother accused her of being a witch after Janine cooked a meal for the family and only her mother became ill after eating the food. A couple of days later, her father came down with a fever and also died.

I saw so many innocents burned and drowned, and it sickened me, but I was helpless to do anything and became angry as to why I had to come here. But I was here to at least save one soul. I shimmered into her cell and she gazed up at me with innocent and serene eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said.

“Are you the devil they all are speaking of? Are you the evil that torments us?” Her voice was calm, peaceful.

“I am neither, but I am a spirit, and I am here as your saviour.”

“My only saviour is my God, and He will be the one to aid me from my peril.”

“And He has, my sweet child, for I am his servant and messenger, here to save you.” I extended my hand to her, the blue light flowing from my hand like supernatural electricity. It reached out to her but never connected until she slowly raised her right arm and took my hand. The aura swam over her, accepting her, and she stepped toward me, placing her arms around my waist.

“Witch! Witch!” someone shouted, mouth agape as he saw the spectacle in front of him. Others came as they heard the cry. “She is hugging the evil one!” another shouted.

I found this so ridiculous and pathetic to hear them say that I was the evil one. I had no horns, my appearance was nowhere close to evil, and I had that lovely warm glow that surrounded us both. I looked at these people, pitying them, stretched my feathered white wings, making myself as bright as I could make my body glow, and vanished with the girl.

I don’t exactly know how I did that, but I did, and it was my intention to cast her somewhere safe. Little did I know that my act of heroism killed her. Nobody told me that this could happen, but it did, and she died holding me. I saw her spirit ascend, and I cried. I cried because of my stupidity, my sadness, and because I felt responsible for her death.

“Do not blame yourself, son,” my father said to me. “She would have died a haunting death, but instead she passed on with grace and love.”

To my amazement, I saw her, a wondrous glow of white appearing before me. “Yes, your father is right. If you hadn’t come, I would have felt the flames burning through me, a pain of a thousand deaths. Either way, Michaelio, I was destined to die, and with you I welcomed death.”

So here I am again, 314 years later. It is now the year 2006. Between the witch trials and now, I have a vague memory of what went on throughout the world’s history. I keep asking myself, how long am I to do this? Do we ever die? And the answer to the latter is no. But we are not forced to continue pursuing chosen ones; we do have a choice.

It's the twenty-first century. So much has passed before my eyes, and yet who would have thought that I would fall in love after all these years? But it happened, and I was confused. I couldn't live in a mortal world, for it was forbidden, and the more time I spent with him, the more my hunger for his love grew. I wanted his soul to blend with mine; I knew I wanted him from the first day I laid eyes on him at the bar.

But there was no point in trying to justify this relationship. It never worked, and I could never love. I felt my heart breaking at the decision I had to make and realized that as a Chosen One, my time has come to be at peace. I had to stop my work with Karl and finally die a permanent death.

Goodbye, Karl.

* * *

The diary ended there with not another word written.

“Great story, Michael,” Karl whispered. “You do know how to weave one hell of a tale.” As he closed the journal and sat it down on the bed, his mind drifted off. There had been a few incidents when he had seen that eerie blue light. And there was that moment when Michael was talking in his sleep, and if Karl’s mind served him well, he had called for his father a few times.

No, it can't be true! Slowly, his anger was building. He was livid with the lies he just read and angry that Michael had left him. He grabbed for the diary, and as his fingers touched the binding, the pages began crumbling in front of him. Within seconds it had become little more than a pile of dust.

He backed away quickly, eyes fixed on what once was Michael’s journal, and then a voice came to him, his own voice, speaking words he remembered hearing: “*I can take your heart and I can have your soul too.*”

“That wasn’t me, Karl.” The voice scared him, turning his body from left to right, his head moving in all directions. His breathing became heavy, and feeling a little faint, he leaned on the dresser for support.

“Michael?”

“*Admit it, Karl, you wanted to be screwed as a kid, didn't you?*”

“*Leave him alone, Samael! He is not yours and never will be.*”

“Ah, I can see and taste the joy of evil within him.”

“Stop it!” Karl roared, his hands covering his ears trying to block their voices. But it didn’t do any good; he could hear them clearly inside his head.

“Let him be, Samael,”

“Very well, Michael,”

The voices finally stopped and Karl slowly dropped his hands away from his ears. “Michael?”

From across the room, a blue orb materialized, hovering a metre off the ground. It grew bigger, taking form – legs, arms, and then a familiar head. It was Michael!

“It’s all true, isn’t it?” Karl asked, astonished. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, and he felt the heat in his body rising. Wiping the sweat, he noticed that his hands were shaking. He sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Michael. “Tell me why you came to me.”

“You know why; the same reason I manifested myself to the others.”

“But I am no angel, Michael. My sins outweigh the good.” He turned to face the apparition, trying to fight off tears. “I miss you so much.”

“We all have a purpose, a path to follow the moment we are born. You are yet to reach yours.”

“Believe me when I say that I have taken every path possible in order to find meaning to my life, and it was only in you that I found it.”

“I may have guided you, but you did the rest on your own. Many temptations were put before you by Samael, and you fought them.”

“Samael?”

“Yes, you heard his voice. He is a fallen angel.” Michael smiled. “You remember him. It is true when they say that we all have a devil on one side of us and an angel on the other. Most people can’t see or hear them.”

Karl took a deep breath and felt a little pain in his chest. He thought nothing of it; he was relieved that he actually wasn’t going crazy!

“Soon we will cross paths.” Michael gradually faded, though his words were still clear and audible. “You will be one memory that I will always treasure and never forget... as it has always been.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have met before. We have been together for a long time. Remember, you are a Knight, Karl.”

“Please don’t go!” Karl whispered, knowing that the words would have little affect.

There was an uncomfortable silence as he lay back on the bed, the sound of his beating heart thumping loudly in his ears. He could actually feel the rush of blood through his body, a swishing sound as the fluid flowed through the arteries.

His body started to sweat, and the burning sensation in his chest was one he couldn’t tolerate anymore. The shortness of breath was also something that began to scare him. He couldn’t be having a heart attack, could he? But there were no chest pains – only an extreme heartburn that seemed to have developed from his stomach and moved up to his chest. It was like a volcanic eruption, the acids escaping from the pit and exploding through his chest.

He sat up on the bed, clutching his chest with his right hand. He started taking deep breaths, all the while telling himself that it was going to be all right. *No need to panic, Karl.* He used the bed sheet that covered him to wipe the sweat from his face, and then tossed it to the floor. The pain started to intensify, and it was then he realised that this was indeed a pain associated with heart attacks.

Before he was able to gather his strength and call for an ambulance, nausea took hold of him, and then stabbing pain, piercing through his chest.

He blacked out.

Karl saw himself next to a man who they called Jacques. In the dream, he adored Jacques and loved him dearly but was afraid to confront him with these feelings. They were taboo, and the thought of sharing such thoughts scared him to think what consequences they may bring. Little did he know that there were others with the same communal behaviour. People saw him as being a wise one, handsome, with eyes the colour of the ocean; a teacher of the wonders of history. Karl spoke clearly and full of meaning and made certain that his words became a permanent fixture in one’s mind. He wanted his pupils to understand the world’s history and make them appreciate how the teachings of the world’s past would assist in learning and helping to live a better and brighter life.

All admired Karl, not just for his wisdom, but the energy he emitted was one of love and peace. He cared and was not afraid to show emotion, but some of the men in the order had warned that it would lead him to a dilemma one day and that he should take better care in whom he confronted and trusted.

Through his treks he met Julius, a blacksmith, after visiting the wounded at a local hospital in Valetta. The stranger's appearance outside the front doors told him that the man had been involved in a battle, and pain that showed in his eyes told Karl that the incident was recent. The stranger's limp also proved that the injury had not taken care of, as there were fresh traces of blood seeping through his garment.

Karl smiled while in this dream state when he noticed Julius looking more and more like Michael.

The stranger's face was pale, though the smile he courageously conjured to Karl was one of politeness. Only then did the Blacksmith lose all strength in his legs and collapse on the cold ground. Immediately, Karl raced to the hospital and sought help, leading the medics to where the blacksmith lay, and assisted with support as the hospital staff applied their expertise in eliminating the infection that was slowly eating away at him.

Later that evening, the blacksmith thanked him and asked for his name,

"Karl"

"You don't have a surname?"

"Surnames are not mandatory. They are only used as titles and to differentiate individuals."

There was a warm smile from the blacksmith as he held out an opened hand to Karl. "My name is Julius. It is a great pleasure."

Karl took hold of the hand, finding it a little difficult to let go. But he also sensed that Julius, too, kept a firm grip and intended to keep it there.

He fell further into unconsciousness. The darkness, the silence, then the bright light appeared. Karl had no idea what was happening, but knowing he was powerless to stop it, he accepted the ride.

Something was happening. Through the bright light he could see himself.

He was working as a blacksmith for the order, and had been having an affair with one of the monks. The risk involved was great, for if a member of the order was found guilty of homosexuality, the punishment was to be tried as a witch and burned at the stake.

He was an outcast because of his sexual preference, and the Catholics in Sicily – especially the Order of Genesis – didn't want homosexuality as part of their daily life. A gay man was a bringer of evil! The Order of Genesis, a religious sect governed by a priest, followed the Bible and lived its beliefs. They had caught one of their own in explicit sexual acts. Though Karl was also part of this act, the order never got to see who else was responsible for such devilish activity.

The eve of the burning, he was caught sneaking into the rectory, making his way to the room where the destined monk awaited the fateful morning.

“It was you all along, am I right?” It was one of the senior ministers who had sighted him, though his tone didn't hold any accusation and was just audible for Julius to hear. “No matter how many times we questioned him, he would never utter your name.”

“I understand you have laws, but can I see him?”

There was an unsettling silence before the minister fished for his keys and, without a word, led Karl into the room, and then quietly disappeared down the corridor.

They didn't have much time together, but the little time they did have was spent in silence. There was nothing Karl could do, and this hurt him.

They were coming for him!

“I will always love you, my friend! You have been like an angel to me,” the monk said.

“And you to me.”

It was that final look, the final stroke of a finger across the cheek, and the last Karl saw of him. He swiftly ran out the door only to be confronted by four men, henchmen as he thought of them, not monastery monks. One suddenly brought a fist to his face, knocking him back to the wall while another grabbed hold of his arms and

spun him around to push his face into the wall. Karl wasn't going to give up without a fight.

He gathered his strength, freed one arm, and with a fist struck with all his might. Little did the monks know that Karl had a knife secretly hidden, and he quickly pulled it out and attacked without any thought. The one who struck him first felt the blade enter the side of his stomach. Bewildered, he stepped back and looked at the blood seeping from the wound. The others stopped in awe. Nothing like this had ever happened within the congregation!

Karl took this moment to flee.

"The devil is among us!" one shouted.

"The devil!" another repeated.

He was running now, out the main doors and toward the gates. Unfortunately, the exit was nine feet high with another two feet of barbed wire. He would also be burned at the stake if caught. He found ways to climb the timbered gates and fumbled through the rustic barbed wire, which caught his skin and tore it like paper. Another pierced his thigh but he was unaware how deep the metal bore into his skin.

Karl jumped, fracturing his ankle as he landed on the rough earth, but there was no point worrying over body injuries anymore. He needed to flee as far as could, away from this civilization and somewhere where he was not known and could start afresh. He knew, though, he would be out of danger once over the gates. The Genesis Order never stepped foot outside their own surroundings, for the ground he now walked on was not blessed and birthed much evil.

He took one last look at this rural community, still able to hear the screamed warnings, and he couldn't help but smile at their stupidity. How quickly it came that the smile was replaced by a sudden wave of hurt, a sadness that suddenly filled his whole body. He could see the fires of hell eating away at an innocent body, a man who only wanted the truth, to believe he was a man, to accept that he was no different than the next human being.

He fought back tears, an emotion he could not remember having since being a child, but they were far too strong for him to hold back. He cried, limped further away, and cried some more. It was hours later when he reached the shores of Sicily. Not far from the shore was a trading boat on which he would stow away.

Some days later, he arrived in Malta.

He was back at the hospital, but was it with Julius or Michael? Now this was creepy! What was he seeing? Were these visions of his past lives?

Karl had already overstayed his welcome, but he couldn't leave Julius, and if he did stay, there could be a possible magical catastrophe.

"I must leave," he said.

Julius looked at him and nodded, understanding what one must do. "The cross you bear is unlike any other I have seen. It is a Knight's cross, one that the King despises."

"You know of us?" Karl was taken by surprise.

"Working in a monastery, you learn a lot of things. So where will you go?"

"I have a calling." Karl turned to leave, and then paused, "In life, one gets a chance to meet a holy being." He said this while staring straight ahead of him, never looking around to face Julius. "My calling is to save another," And then he left.

Karl was still unconscious, and the dream didn't wake him. His heart was pounding, though he felt nothing as he descended deeper and deeper into an unknown void. He saw himself as an angel, a saviour to all humans. He saw his mother with bright wings waiting to greet his arrival. And then there was Michael, whose wings seemed to stretch forever, glowing brighter the nearer he got. They were closing around him, accepting him, holding him, and he held Michael tightly, happy that he was here, with him, together again, for eternity.

Michael's wings had swallowed him, and Karl finally felt safe, warm, and at peace.

He closed his eyes, and his heart stopped beating.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carlo Vella was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and now lives in Barcelona, Spain. Having written two previous novels as a hobby, he never pursued his writing career seriously until winning a short story contest.

Carlo has written travelogues for private tour operators as well as journals for businesses, and is currently working as an English teacher for foreign students in Barcelona, spending his free time writing.