

Prologue

House of the Temple

8:33 P.M.

The secret is how to die.

Since the beginning of time, the secret had always been how to die.

The thirty-four-year-old initiate gazed down at the human skull cradled in his palms. The skull was hollow, like a bowl, filled with bloodred wine.

Drink it, he told himself. You have nothing to fear.

As was tradition, he had begun this journey adorned in the ritualistic garb of a medieval heretic being led to the gallows, his loose-fitting shirt gaping open to reveal his pale chest, his left pant leg rolled up to the knee, and his right sleeve rolled up to the elbow. Around his neck hung a heavy rope noose—a “cable-tow” as the brethren called it. Tonight, however, like the brethren bearing witness, he was dressed as a master.

The assembly of brothers encircling him all were adorned in their full regalia of lambskin aprons, sashes, and white gloves. Around their necks hung ceremonial jewels that glistened like ghostly eyes in the muted light. Many of these men held powerful stations in life, and yet the initiate knew their worldly ranks meant nothing within these walls. Here all men were equals, sworn brothers sharing a mystical bond.

As he surveyed the daunting assembly, the initiate wondered who on the outside would ever believe that this collection of men would assemble in one place . . . much less *this* place. The room looked like a holy sanctuary from the ancient world.

The truth, however, was stranger still.

I am just blocks away from the White House.

This colossal edifice, located at 1733 Sixteenth Street NW in Washington, D.C., was a replica of a pre-Christian temple—the temple of King Mausolus, the original *mausoleum* . . . a place to be taken after death. Outside the main entrance, two seventeen-ton sphinxes guarded the bronze

doors. The interior was an ornate labyrinth of ritualistic chambers, halls, sealed vaults, libraries, and even a hollow wall that held the remains of two human bodies. The initiate had been told every room in this building held a secret, and yet he knew no room held deeper secrets than the gigantic chamber in which he was currently kneeling with a skull cradled in his palms.

The Temple Room.

This room was a perfect square. And cavernous. The ceiling soared an astonishing one hundred feet overhead, supported by monolithic columns of green granite. A tiered gallery of dark Russian walnut seats with hand-tooled pigskin encircled the room. A thirty-three-foot-tall throne dominated the western wall, with a concealed pipe organ opposite it. The walls were a kaleidoscope of ancient symbols . . . Egyptian, Hebraic, astronomical, alchemical, and others yet unknown.

Tonight, the Temple Room was lit by a series of precisely arranged candles. Their dim glow was aided only by a pale shaft of moonlight that filtered down through the expansive oculus in the ceiling and illuminated the room's most startling feature—an enormous altar hewn from a solid block of polished Belgian black marble, situated dead center of the square chamber.

The secret is how to die, the initiate reminded himself.

"It is time," a voice whispered.

The initiate let his gaze climb the distinguished white-robed figure standing before him. *The Supreme Worshipful Master*. The man, in his late fifties, was an American icon, well loved, robust, and incalculably wealthy. His once-dark hair was turning silver, and his famous visage reflected a lifetime of power and a vigorous intellect.

"Take the oath," the Worshipful Master said, his voice soft like falling snow. "Complete your journey."

The initiate's journey, like all such journeys, had begun at the first degree. On that night, in a ritual similar to this one, the Worshipful Master had blindfolded him with a velvet hoodwink and pressed a ceremonial dagger to his bare chest, demanding: "Do you seriously declare on your honor, uninfluenced by mercenary or any other unworthy motive, that you freely and voluntarily offer yourself as a candidate for the mysteries and privileges of this brotherhood?"

"I do," the initiate had lied.

"Then let this be a sting to your consciousness," the master had warned him, "as well as instant death should you ever betray the secrets to be imparted to you."

At the time, the initiate had felt no fear. *They will never know my true purpose here.*

Tonight, however, he sensed a foreboding solemnity in the Temple Room, and his mind began replaying all the dire warnings he had been given on his journey, threats of terrible consequences if he ever shared the ancient secrets he was about to learn: *Throat cut from ear to ear . . . tongue torn out by its roots . . . bowels taken out and burned . . . scattered to the four winds of heaven . . . heart plucked out and given to the beasts of the field—*

“Brother,” the gray-eyed master said, placing his left hand on the initiate’s shoulder. “Take the final oath.”

Steeling himself for the last step of his journey, the initiate shifted his muscular frame and turned his attention back to the skull cradled in his palms. The crimson wine looked almost black in the dim candlelight. The chamber had fallen deathly silent, and he could feel all of the witnesses watching him, waiting for him to take his final oath and join their elite ranks.

Tonight, he thought, something is taking place within these walls that has never before occurred in the history of this brotherhood. Not once, in centuries.

He knew it would be the spark . . . and it would give him unfathomable power. Energized, he drew a breath and spoke aloud the same words that countless men had spoken before him in countries all over the world.

“May this wine I now drink become a deadly poison to me . . . should I ever knowingly or willfully violate my oath.”

His words echoed in the hollow space.

Then all was quiet.

Steadying his hands, the initiate raised the skull to his mouth and felt his lips touch the dry bone. He closed his eyes and tipped the skull toward his mouth, drinking the wine in long, deep swallows. When the last drop was gone, he lowered the skull.

For an instant, he thought he felt his lungs growing tight, and his heart began to pound wildly. *My God, they know!* Then, as quickly as it came, the feeling passed.

A pleasant warmth began to stream through his body. The initiate exhaled, smiling inwardly as he gazed up at the unsuspecting gray-eyed man who had foolishly admitted him into this brotherhood’s most secretive ranks.

Soon you will lose everything you hold most dear.

CHAPTER 1

The Otis elevator climbing the south pillar of the Eiffel Tower was overflowing with tourists. Inside the cramped lift, an austere businessman in a pressed suit gazed down at the boy beside him. “You look pale, son. You should have stayed on the ground.”

“I’m okay . . .” the boy answered, struggling to control his anxiety. “I’ll get out on the next level.” *I can’t breathe.*

The man leaned closer. “I thought by now you would have gotten over this.” He brushed the child’s cheek affectionately.

The boy felt ashamed to disappoint his father, but he could barely hear through the ringing in his ears. *I can’t breathe. I’ve got to get out of this box!*

The elevator operator was saying something reassuring about the lift’s articulated pistons and puddled-iron construction. Far beneath them, the streets of Paris stretched out in all directions.

Almost there, the boy told himself, craning his neck and looking up at the unloading platform. *Just hold on.*

As the lift angled steeply toward the upper viewing deck, the shaft began to narrow, its massive struts contracting into a tight, vertical tunnel.

“Dad, I don’t think—”

Suddenly a staccato crack echoed overhead. The carriage jerked, swaying awkwardly to one side. Frayed cables began whipping around the carriage, thrashing like snakes. The boy reached out for his father.

“Dad!”

Their eyes locked for one terrifying second.

Then the bottom dropped out.

Robert Langdon jolted upright in his soft leather seat, startling out of the semiconscious daydream. He was sitting all alone in the enormous cabin of a Falcon 2000EX corporate jet as it bounced its way through turbulence. In the background, the dual Pratt & Whitney engines hummed evenly.

“Mr. Langdon?” The intercom crackled overhead. “We’re on final approach.”

Langdon sat up straight and slid his lecture notes back into his leather daybag. He'd been halfway through reviewing Masonic symbology when his mind had drifted. The daydream about his late father, Langdon suspected, had been stirred by this morning's unexpected invitation from Langdon's longtime mentor, Peter Solomon.

The other man I never want to disappoint.

The fifty-eight-year-old philanthropist, historian, and scientist had taken Langdon under his wing nearly thirty years ago, in many ways filling the void left by Langdon's father's death. Despite the man's influential family dynasty and massive wealth, Langdon had found humility and warmth in Solomon's soft gray eyes.

Outside the window the sun had set, but Langdon could still make out the slender silhouette of the world's largest obelisk, rising on the horizon like the spire of an ancient gnomon. The 555-foot marble-faced obelisk marked this nation's heart. All around the spire, the meticulous geometry of streets and monuments radiated outward.

Even from the air, Washington, D.C., exuded an almost mystical power.

Langdon loved this city, and as the jet touched down, he felt a rising excitement about what lay ahead. The jet taxied to a private terminal somewhere in the vast expanse of Dulles International Airport and came to a stop.

Langdon gathered his things, thanked the pilots, and stepped out of the jet's luxurious interior onto the foldout staircase. The cold January air felt liberating.

Breathe, Robert, he thought, appreciating the wide-open spaces.

A blanket of white fog crept across the runway, and Langdon had the sensation he was stepping into a marsh as he descended onto the misty tarmac.

"Hello! Hello!" a singsong British voice shouted from across the tarmac. "Professor Langdon?"

Langdon looked up to see a middle-aged woman with a badge and clipboard hurrying toward him, waving happily as he approached. Curly blond hair protruded from under a stylish knit wool hat.

"Welcome to Washington, sir!"

Langdon smiled. "Thank you."

"My name is Pam, from passenger services." The woman spoke with an exuberance that was almost unsettling. "If you'll come with me, sir, your car is waiting."

Langdon followed her across the runway toward the Signature terminal, which was surrounded by glistening private jets. *A taxi stand for the rich and famous.*

"I hate to embarrass you, Professor," the woman said, sounding sheepish, "but you *are* the Robert Langdon who writes books about symbols and religion, aren't you?"

Langdon hesitated and then nodded.

"I thought so!" she said, beaming. "My book group read your book about the sacred feminine and the church! What a delicious scandal that one caused! You do enjoy putting the fox in the henhouse!"

Langdon smiled. "Scandal wasn't really my intention."

The woman seemed to sense Langdon was not in the mood to discuss his work. "I'm sorry. Listen to me rattling on. I know you probably get tired of being recognized . . . but it's your own fault." She playfully motioned to his clothing. "Your uniform gave you away."

My uniform? Langdon glanced down at his attire. He was wearing his usual charcoal turtleneck, Harris Tweed jacket, khakis, and collegiate cordovan loafers . . . his standard attire for the classroom, lecture circuit, author photos, and social events.

The woman laughed. "Those turtlenecks you wear are so dated. You'd look much sharper in a tie!"

No chance, Langdon thought. *Little nooses.*

Neckties had been required six days a week when Langdon attended Phillips Exeter Academy, and despite the headmaster's romantic claims that the origin of the cravat went back to the silk *fascalia* worn by Roman orators to warm their vocal cords, Langdon knew that, etymologically, *cravat* actually derived from a ruthless band of "Croat" mercenaries who donned knotted neckerchiefs before they stormed into battle. To this day, this ancient battle garb was donned by modern office warriors hoping to intimidate their enemies in daily boardroom battles.

"Thanks for the advice," Langdon said with a chuckle. "I'll consider a tie in the future."

Mercifully, a professional-looking man in a dark suit got out of a sleek Lincoln Town Car parked near the terminal and held up his finger. "Mr. Langdon? I'm Charles with Beltway Limousine." He opened the passenger door. "Good evening, sir. Welcome to Washington."

Langdon tipped Pam for her hospitality and then climbed into the plush interior of the Town Car. The driver showed him the temperature controls, the bottled water, and the basket of hot muffins. Seconds later, Langdon was speeding away on a private access road. *So this is how the other half lives.*

As the driver gunned the car up Windsock Drive, he consulted his passenger manifest and placed a quick call. "This is Beltway Limousine," the

driver said with professional efficiency. "I was asked to confirm once my passenger had landed." He paused. "Yes, sir. Your guest, Mr. Langdon, has arrived, and I will deliver him to the Capitol Building by seven P.M. You're welcome, sir." He hung up.

Langdon had to smile. *No stone left unturned.* Peter Solomon's attention to detail was one of his most potent assets, allowing him to manage his substantial power with apparent ease. *A few billion dollars in the bank doesn't hurt either.*

Langdon settled into the plush leather seat and closed his eyes as the noise of the airport faded behind him. The U.S. Capitol was a half hour away, and he appreciated the time alone to gather his thoughts. Everything had happened so quickly today that Langdon only now had begun to think in earnest about the incredible evening that lay ahead.

Arriving under a veil of secrecy, Langdon thought, amused by the prospect.

Ten miles from the Capitol Building, a lone figure was eagerly preparing for Robert Langdon's arrival.