

Plague of Coins

The Judas Chronicles, #1

by Aiden James, 1959–

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Chapter 1

This looks promising...

It was late one evening, and I stood in the bowels of the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research. The staff had gone home for the night, and I was alone. Surrounded by lab equipment, computers, and stacks of dusty old books, this room could only be described as creepy. *Damned* creepy.

Then again, many would describe me as damned creepy, too. And maybe a little shady—at least if I ever get caught rummaging around in the basement. As a Smithsonian archivist, most of what I spend my days reviewing is upstairs or in other locales managed by the National Museum of History. Really, I rarely venture outside of the Anthropological Archives' scope of responsibility. Just like a good, dependable archivist should be doing.

Oh, it isn't so terrible, all cynicism aside. In my current vocation, I've been privileged to view some of the most *secret* collections of field notes, photographs, and correspondence from the more significant scientific expeditions covering the past two centuries. Hell, that's why the job appealed to me in the first place. My son, Dr. Alistair Wolfgang Barrow, the noted historian and professor at Georgetown, is the one who brought it to my attention. Yes, he's the very same historian noted for his treatments concerning the Middle East and its volatile tensions. Tensions fueled by millennia of history and bad blood that will take decades if not centuries to cure, despite the latest diplomatic progress.

But I digress.

Upon the near-obsolete video screen, a collection of articles and photographs spanning nearly eighty years scrolled before my eyes. All of this information centered around one small village in Iran. Al-haroun is the name of the place.

I paused to sip my coffee while rubbing my eyes. Not so much from being tired as the damned viewer's fuzziness. I'm spoiled by my MAC.

Yes, very promising... could be home to one small, priceless piece of silver...

I get a feel for things, you see. It's something I've gotten better with over time. Call it honed experience, or perhaps it's the mastery that comes with practice and carefully aged wisdom and acute perception.

Okay... I can almost hear the indignant silent questions out there. 'And who in the hell are *you*, hot shot?' That's what *I'd* be wondering right about now, after re-reading the first two pages of my story.

Fair enough. My name is William. William J. Barrow, though I'm sure you already determined my last name from my son. I like the name William, actually better than any other moniker I've gone by since the Crusades ended. It makes it a lot easier for me to fit in without engendering questions about *who* I am or *where* I come from. I like it much better than any of the Apostle names like Peter, Paul, and Matthew. Although, pretending to be Bartholomew nearly two thousand years ago was a lot of fun.

That got you, I'm sure.

It would make me older than dirt. Right? Well, if we ever cross paths you won't even notice me if it's some ancient Methuselah you're seeking. I don't look a day over thirty—haven't looked a day past the 'prime of life' since I wrote my own chapter on the most famous stage in modern history.

Back then my Hebrew name was Yehuda. I guess if history had left me hanging from some tree or tripping into a garden to where my guts squirted out of my condemned body, the world would be no wiser. My role in the ultimate betrayal long forgotten, maybe I'd be just a small footnote, and not the most reviled human being ever to walk this earth.

You can thank the Greeks and Romans for that honor, unfortunately. Or, I guess I can... at least credit goes to them. Born in Kenoth in the region of Judea, and falsely accused of being a member of the *Sicari*. Yes, these are all clues... Give up?

The Greek for Yehuda is Yudas, and that name in Roman is Judas.

So there... that's me. I'm Judas Iscariot.

But before you simply close this book in disgust, let me explain a few things. Things that could change your mind about the above claim, and take on a little of my perspective. In truth, I could literally give a rat's ass if you believe I'm Judas or not. It's not even the reason I've decided to write down my story. After all, if I don't gain the final nine silver pieces needed for my restitution during my current *lifetime ruse* as William Barrow, I'll still be working on this project while you and everyone you care about has died and passed away. Perhaps all of you will land in the eternal Holy Mecca I so badly long for... To be forgiven at long last and reunited with the One I looked on as a mere prophet and wonderful teacher, instead of the Lord of Lords that He is.

How do I know the truth about Jesus now as compared to then? You'll have to read on for that answer—and it comes in bits and pieces, really. No, it won't be some pompous sermon. What I've learned these past two thousand years transcends anything and everything you've ever read in *any* book—including what is considered the standards for the Holy Scriptures—like the Bible, Koran, etc. You'd be surprised at the shenanigans I've witnessed that later became the accepted "truth from the very mouth of God Almighty."

So much is rubbish, and yet hidden within it all is the truth. Or, at least a version of the *eternal* truth.

But I digress, again. Just know that I am supremely confident of this: everyone's burning questions will be answered by the end of my story... the first installment of what remains of my earthly quest.

So, back to this place called Al-haroun. While there are many places in the world that suffer from a host of calamities, only a few originate from a small epicenter within a few square miles. And not every one of these places contains what I need. However, since at first glance it is impossible to know for sure, I must research them all.

As a town, Al-haroun is no stranger to the wrath of God, or if you will, the unfortunate reputation as a cursed place. That night, I viewed article after article, along with an endless stream of film images to support the stories—literally, an endless succession of earthquakes, floods, famines, wars, and plague. Even a rare

tornado struck the town in 1942 that destroyed nine homes and killed three people. Not exactly catastrophic weather, unless you consider the fact this is Iran we're talking about and not Topeka, Kansas.

But all in all, if one considers the previous millennium's host of travesties visited upon this small area, I have to consider the likely source: a single coin. Buried somewhere, and likely hidden from the light of day for centuries. Meanwhile, hundreds, if not thousands of lives have been ruined—either killed, homeless, or both. The last article I looked at talked about a rare blizzard from thirty years ago. That event took place in May, when things begin to heat up near the Alborz Mountains. More than three feet of snow fell upon the town, and the temperatures plummeted deeply enough to destroy livestock and crops.

The people believe they're cursed, that somehow they've offended Allah. If only they knew that something there—likely buried beneath the soil—was indeed offensive to God, they might burn everything to the ground and leave. Forever.

My gut instinct was telling me a single silver shekel was responsible. One that bears Caesar's notorious beak of a nose on one side and a proud eagle upon the back. Just like twenty-nine others I once accepted as payment for my evil deed. A moment of folly, and to think it could've been forty pieces of silver if Caiaphas hadn't tried to cheat me by offering half-shekels instead.

Anyway, I was certain my assumption was one hundred percent correct. As I studied the latest stories and pictures on the screen, my left hand began to tremble. This familiar sensation always confirms the truth of what my intuitions tell me.

Silver 'blood-coin' number twenty-two is within reach.

Satisfied, I turned off the viewer. I then returned the older film to the correct cabinets and the newer CDs and flash drives to their file drawers.

It was time to request some vacation days, and make arrangements for a little trip overseas.

Chapter 2

Prowling the streets of D.C. after midnight is probably not a brilliant idea... at least for most folks. But for an immortal human being, the fear of injury or death from some hard-up junkie or other low-life miscreant has long since left me.

Perhaps the biggest miracle for most folks—at least those who have become more than mere acquaintances over the centuries—is the fact that my cells are in a continuous process of immediate regeneration. I can't age because my body won't let it happen. It's the same for injuries—even the most extreme amputations anyone can concoct. Not that I intend to present details that will make the faint of heart squeamish. But, obviously, if nothing can hurt me, then I can't die. Since it's been so long since I haven't felt well physically, I don't even remember what it's like to be sick.

The only things I *do* remember are the brief moments when I have experienced physical pain. Like when I first tried to strangle myself after betraying my buddy Jesus long ago. Or, the two dozen times I've been executed during the past two

millennia. Not a lot of fun. Fortunately, each death has come with some sort of benefit, although not all have been altruistic enough to profit my soul or my coin-collecting journey.

I'm sure that many of you have questions about this, and I'll get around to explaining more about it all. But for now, my purpose for mentioning any of this stuff is to set up my midnight rendezvous with my boy, Alistair.

"Ali, it's me—your dad!" I whispered, harshly, into the intercom system provided by his posh condo building near the Capitol. "I think I've found Number Twenty-two."

"Okay, Pops... come on up!" he said, after a moment's hesitation. I must have roused him from a wonderful dream. The main door buzzed open, and I moved inside the building.

Harold Mathis, the night watchman, smiled and gave me a nod as I passed by his station.

"Hey, Mr. Barrow, I see you're burnin' the midnight oil again!" He chuckled, and his light gray eyes seemed to glow within his smooth ebony skin. "You keep that up and you'll start lookin' like me and your old man!"

His smile widened, revealing a perfect set of veneers. To me, Harold doesn't look a day over forty-five. But he's only a year or two younger than my boy, who'll be sixty-one in about a month from now. Not only does my kid get to hear about how his African-American pal looks a helluva lot younger than him, he's also in real danger of one day soon looking like he's my grandpa instead of my dad.

It's one of the reasons I keep Alistair stocked up with either plenty of Jack Daniels, or my preferred brand of imported Scotch, Dewar's.

"Yeah, that'd be an awful sight, wouldn't it?" I returned Harold's smile as I headed for the elevator. "Hopefully I can catch up on some sleep in the next week when I go on vacation!"

"Vacation? *You??*" He craned his head around the corner to watch me step inside the elevator car. "Alistair tells me that you're *always* workin'—even when you're supposed to be *on* a vacation!"

I laughed along with him until the elevator door closed and the car began its labored climb to the top floor. Alistair resides in a penthouse unit, which would be quite a sum each month on his income, even as substantial as it is. But I've accumulated a nice fortune over the years, with bank accounts spread throughout the world. Picking up the tab for this extravagance was my idea, and after he had allowed me to bring in a first-rate decorator sensitive to my boy's tastes and other preferences, Alistair relented to staying there.

It's the least I could do to make up for my absence in his life from puberty until shortly before his thirty-fourth birthday.

* * * * *

"Do you think you will ever learn to control the impulse to wake me up in the middle of the night when a wild idea hits you?"

Gruffer than usual when I've awakened him, Alistair seemed especially irritated that I buzzed him out of the world of dreams to hear about a hunch, instead of fact. These things always start as hunches... but to be honest, sometimes the hunch goes *poof!* before I've finished making plane reservations. Something about

Al-haroun felt much more promising than other hunches, and it definitely was stronger than anything else in the past year.

“It’s different this time. I’m sure of it, son.”

I followed him into his spacious living room. The walls bore an assortment of items from Africa, South America, and the Himalayas. All were artifacts from our joint expeditions.

He motioned to the bar, where he had already poured me a glass of Dewar’s, circa 1981, which was a fairly decent year. He held a small mug with what looked like hot chocolate. Knowing Alistair’s habits as well as I do, whatever was steaming in his cup certainly contained some sort of sleep aid, natural or enhanced. I wouldn’t have long to talk about my findings from earlier that night.

“So it isn’t like the *sure thing* in Denmark, I take it?” He snickered.

Ouch! Yeah, that one stung a little. With his eyebrow raised, he reminded me so much of his mother. My son was born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland, where I met his mom, Beatrice McGregor, back in 1948, right after the war. He is the perfect blend of she and I. As he has grown older, he draws many comparisons to Sean Connery. He bears the same Scottish brogue in the accent, along with prominent dark eyebrows and intense brown eyes that twinkle with mirth. Especially when he savors a pipe, like the one he just picked up from the coffee table while awaiting my reply.

“Hell, no!” I said, perhaps more meanly than warranted. But no parent reacts well to a smart mouth—regardless of the fact my kid has been an independent adult since he was seventeen. I picked up my glass of Scotch before continuing, and sat down on the sofa across from the overstuffed chair he preferred. “Not only are all the signs that we look for present in this location, but it’s a place I’ve considered before. I’ve just never gotten around to actually checking it out.”

“Hmmm.” He sat down and lit his pipe, and then waited for the pungent cherry almond scent to waft toward me.

No doubt, he enjoyed seeing my face flush from rising indignation fed by my impatience. It’s a trait that women have often told me sets off my handsomeness. Something about my blue eyes becoming sapphire chips of icy fire. I believe it’s the quality that once made the fairer gender compare me to Errol Flynn back in the 1920s and more recently Pierce Brosnan. Not to mention my infectious charm and toned physique have never hurt my allure to women or men.

“Okay... where is this place?”

“It’s in Iran, in a very small town not far from the Caspian Sea, near Tabriz and the Russian border,” I explained. “Getting there will be a little tricky, but we can use our clearances to make the trip with minimal resistance from Tehran.”

“So, you want *me* to come along with you on this wild goose chase?” He snickered again, but this time he frowned. “Without considering that I might be very busy? I’ve got preparations for next fall’s session to take care of. My syllabus is due before the Fourth of July holiday begins.”

“It’s early June, son, which means you’ll still have a week or two by the time we get back to wrap that up.” My mood immediately lifted. If it had been a definite ‘no go’, he would’ve said so already. “Besides, I can help you get your fall plan together like I did the last time, in case you end up being pressed for time.”

“Humph! You nearly cost me my post as a result of that fiasco, I might add!” He pointed his pipe at me as if it were a small Derringer.

My son looked adorable right then, dressed in his bathrobe and house slippers while trying to muster some sort of malice at me. I couldn’t help picturing him as a young boy, pointing a popgun at me Christmas morning when he was five.

“And you underestimated my influence on the Dean and Chancellor’s office.” I chuckled at both his harmless accusation and irritated appearance. “Do you really believe they would be so bold as to bite a hand that feeds them, again?”

“No, I suppose not.”

Hard to tell if he saw the situation from my point of view, or realized it would do no good to argue with his dear old dad. But I worried he might be getting tired again. I needed to get to the point of this visit quickly.

“I’m submitting a vacation request for two weeks, beginning this Friday.” I lowered my tone to reinforce my seriousness. “I would really like for you to come along, since you are more skilled in Arabic and Persian dialects than I am these days—at least with the modern ones. You can leave the Hebrew to me.” I added an assuring smile to sell this, to close the deal.

“Oh joy,” he said, feigning dread. But the impish twinkle in his eyes told me otherwise. Alistair had accompanied me on finding the latest eleven pieces of silver, which made us both hopeful that the quest to find the remaining nine could still happen in his lifetime. “But, are you sure we can’t just wait until there is a more opportune time to pursue this? You haven’t been given a *feel* for someplace closer, say like up in Nantucket or inside the Gateway Arch of St. Louis?” He laughed, weakly.

“No, son, I believe the two we found here in the states last year are it for this continent.” I rose to my feet in confidence that what I sought to achieve was indeed a success. Alistair would join me on my latest quest. “Even so, I do hope this new one turns out as easy as finding a rare shekel in a pawn shop like the one in Mobile, Alabama or that we meet up with another collector like the guy in Missoula, Montana.”

“That guy almost cleaned out your U.S. bank account,” said Alistair, rising to his feet to show me the door. For a moment, I worried the excitement I saw dancing in his eyes would keep him from going back to sleep after I left. “I wonder what would happen if the Iranian government finds out about this and acts as unscrupulous as Mr. Ivan Sutter from Montana.”

“Hopefully, they would be smarter and more worried about the consequences for their immortal souls.” I hoped this didn’t come across as pious and insensitive. News about Mr. Sutter’s sudden passing from a terrible accident after I paid his thirteen-point-five million-dollar price tag for that particular coin has made us both reconsider the gravity of what we’re dealing with. It’s vitally important to keep our own souls unsullied and consciences clean.

If nothing else, living for two thousand years has taught me this: Greed will never be tolerated by the Almighty. I sometimes worry that my own haste to gather the last coins might be perceived in a less than flattering light. After all, it took nearly nineteen hundred years to find the first eleven coins, and a mere thirty to recover the last ten. I just pray my eagerness as of late to complete the arduous task will be seen more as humble expectance that my Lord will return soon...

I sure as hell don't wish to be left behind permanently the next time He's here.

Chapter 3

The following morning I got started a little later than usual. Wednesday. I took it as a day to avoid rush hour madness to get to my job. Not that my cohorts at the National Museum of Natural History aren't a little perturbed when I'm absent. But I learned awhile back that with an approved psychological exam, I could actually qualify for some extra time off every two weeks.

Thank Goodness for FMLA!

I can already hear the groans out there... Yes, I make a respectable living and have millions tucked away. That alone should disqualify me from participating in this exceptional government program—one that actually benefits the powerless majority of American workers who suffer from an array of chronic maladies. It's intended *only* for people with *certifiable* afflictions. Right?

Well, I pay taxes too. And, according to ninety-nine percent of the psychiatrists I've known during the past one hundred years, I do suffer from a serious delusion. After all, I claim to be the *real* Judas Iscariot.

I'm sure if I hadn't waited until I was fully vested at the Smithsonian, with more than a decade's worth of solid employment history, I'd have been thrown out on the street after first telling Dr. Norman Sturgeon who I am. Really, it was more me wanting to get it off my chest with someone not too close to me—like my son. Or, share it with someone who wouldn't laugh out loud before I finished telling the summary of my two thousand year existence. And, get this... it was the good doctor himself who recommended I file for FMLA coverage, since his prognosis was for *extensive, long-term treatment*.

Fortunately for me, my honed silver-tongue allowed me to manipulate the initial analysis to where he agreed that, a) I present no immediate physical danger to myself or to others, and b) Bi-weekly counseling sessions should be sufficient, since my dominant persona of *William Barrow* shows no outward signs of crumbling. Even better was the eventual hand-off of my file to Dr. Sturgeon's lovely assistant, Dr. Evelyn Rose.

Not that I'm a practicing philanderer, but I still enjoy healthy flirtations now and then. In truth, I've spent many centuries chasing tail and having a great deal of fun doing it. The boastful celebrity 'tell-alls' that give absurd numbers of sexual conquests pale terribly in comparison to the wanton escapades I've tallied during my stay on planet earth. And, in fairness, perhaps I would still be a devoted hedonist when it comes to my relations with both women and men. But that all changed when I met Beatrice.

Only those who have met their soul mate—or at least *one* of their eternal companions, since we all have several—will relate to what I tell you next, I'm sure. Once our eyes met in that rundown Glasgow pub, where the charged air around us forced a meeting destined from before her birth, my ideas of what sex and love entailed were changed forever. No one has touched my heart since—at least nothing with the pull that Beatrice has.

Still, it doesn't stop me from taking an occasional look at the 'menu', so to speak.

That's where Dr. Rose comes in.

"I thought you might have forgotten your appointment today," she said, chuckling to herself as she closed her office door behind us. "Usually, you're here ten minutes before nine, so I became a little worried when nine o'clock arrived and *no William.*"

I always wait for her to move around the desk to her preferred high-back leather chair before I take my seat upon the plush sofa across from her. I like to watch her walk, though I've ceased to mentally undress the fairer sex in their presence. Better to save those images until later on, for when I'm alone with nothing else to do...

"I wouldn't miss this for the world." I smiled smugly as I took my usual seat, toward the far left end of the sofa and the farthest distance from her. A much better view, my dears.

Her red form-fitting dress lingered in my mind while I considered if such attire best suited her loose crimson curls resting upon her shoulders or not. It drew my gaze back up from her ample bosom. Unfortunately, her bright green eyes were watching me. The expression on her face made me think she followed the flow of every silent descriptive word that had just passed through my decadent mind... Ah, *damn!*

"So, are you making any progress with the assignment I gave you in our last session?" She smiled coyly.

"Well, it depends," I told her, pausing to look around the room, as if gathering my thoughts.

I like the room's décor. Always have... and I'm not talking about the expensive cherry executive desk, or the matching Chippendale shelves filled with all kinds of books detailing every theorem and behavioral treatment model thought up and proposed as fact since the dawn of the twentieth century. Such rubbish—the books, I mean—at least for the most part. But I do like the row of personal photographs she keeps on the front edge of the desk, closest to where I like to sit.

"It depends on what?" she prodded, gently, as if afraid I might clam up. Sometimes I do that...no sense in being an easy cure for her, and watch my FMLA coverage and visits with the sexy doc dissolve before my very eyes. "Did you follow the exercises, the ones where you recited the positive affirmations?"

"What, that I am William Barrow?" I was unable to stifle a slight snicker. I suddenly noticed that one of the pictures had recently been changed. Instead of the one featuring her smiling face next to a young blonde male's handsome mug, there was now a photo featuring only her in a low-cut cocktail dress. I immediately felt a surge of joy, since apparently the good-looking kid was no longer in the picture. Literally. "Sure, Dr. Rose... that was easy."

Down boy... she thinks you're nuts, remember?

"And, you followed that with the other half of the assignment...yes?"

"Well, the second part wasn't quite so easy." I shifted in my seat and prepared for the lovely scowl I knew was forthcoming.

"And why not?" A touch of disappointment laced her delivery.

I briefly entertained the fantasy she actually liked me, and perhaps hoped I'd come to my senses and enthusiastically proclaim I'm not really Judas in the flesh. Maybe I could replace the missing man in her life. But...

"Because I *am* Judas Iscariot." I felt a strange mixture of pride and sorrow. Pride for my unwavering devotion to the truth about myself, and sorrow in regard to the certain deathblow my lurid fantasies involving Dr. Evelyn Rose would endure. "And I so hate pretending to be something I'm not. I can tolerate being William Barrow as long as it isn't permanent. No matter what persona I take on in any given century, at the end of the day I'm still the man who betrayed Christ."

Priceless. The look of surprise, disappointment, and scorn upon her face. Not the first time I've elicited such a response from a beautiful woman by confessing who I am. But definitely the first time the female had a PHD attached to her name.

"William... oh, dear William what am I going to do with you?" She didn't deliver this in a loving tone that would normally fit the words. "You're simply going to have to give this up. It will do you no good to go on believing this fantasy."

She stood up from her desk and walked over to the window behind her, shaking her head while frowning. One more opportunity to study the subtle lines along the back of her stockings and hope she didn't notice my lingering gaze upon her *derriere*.

"I can't. No more than you can pretend to be someone you're not."

"So, you expect us all to believe that you are truly immortal. The only one of your kind?" She snickered and moved back to her chair, pulling open the top drawer to her desk.

"No," I said. I was a little irritated with her smugness. She looked up suddenly, as either my reply or the sharpness in my tone caught her by surprise. "I mean, *yes*, I am immortal... but no, I'm not the only one."

How's that for opening a can of worms? I'm sure her honest curiosity hidden behind that elite psychiatrist façade would match the questions everyone else has about my statement. It's the truth... there are others, though we are more different than alike in terms of what makes us eternal wanderers across the globe. Not just things like vampires—which I understand are all the rage in modern literature, movies, games, etc. I was once considered the Prince of such beings. I assure you that assertion is a load of bull. I don't drink blood—never have—and I'm very much alive. I'm your typical warm-blooded male, but a bit older than what you're used to seeing.

"So, what, you're buddies with Dracula, I take it? Or maybe you and Elvis have become pals since he supposedly faked his death!" She laughed and sat back in her chair, holding a manila folder with what I assumed is the summary of my case history. "Better yet, maybe you and Comte St. Germaine have been globetrotting the past few centuries together!"

"Actually, he prefers his solitude." I kept a keen eye on her facial movements to help me discern a motive behind her flippant response to my latest affirmation of my immortality. Maybe this was a brief foray on her part, to try and trip me up by delving into a different theoretic discipline—perhaps more Rogerian or Skinnerian than her usual approach? "He hasn't traveled in plain view for nearly two centuries, and the last time he and I shared an extensive trip across *any* continent

was right after the Crusades, in 1292, when I convinced him to come with me to Madrid to watch the burning of a Moorish monument.”

A little flutter in her eyes, although more than likely an indication that I had just impressed her with the technical depth of my immortal fantasy. No doubt she still thinks I’m under the spell of a serious delusion.

“So you’re stating that Comte St. Germaine is even older than what Voltaire asserted back in the late eighteenth century?”

Such disbelief in her tone... but fascination in the eyes.

“Why, yes, that is exactly the truth,” I confirmed, though unsure how much I wanted to serve her. Suffice it to say there are enough fun facts inside this head of mine to keep a good party rolling for hours on end. “He and his brother, Racco, are older than I am. I first ran into the Germaine brothers in Damascus back in the early third century A.D. We recognized each other when we crossed paths again in Constantinople in the mid fourth century, realizing by then that we were all afflicted with the same status. Although, as alchemists their immortality was on purpose while mine is simply a curse. Their names were different back then, and after the brothers had a falling out around the sixth century, I haven’t seen either one very often.”

An awkward moment of silence followed. She looked down at the file until she was ready to address me again.

“You need help, William.” She pursed her lips seductively while she tapped them with the soft eraser on her pencil. “Much more help than I can give you.”

“I *am* immortal, doc.”

“I know you think that.”

“I can’t die.” I watched her facial expression as it tightened, and then searched for a fissure in her façade.

“I know you think that,” she repeated. My psychiatrist was on professional lockdown. I feared our session would be cut short at any moment.

“I have been hung, stabbed, shot, and drawn-n’-quartered. I’ve been beheaded and disemboweled, and have even faced the dreaded iron maiden,” I said, hoping to storm her secured fortress. “If that weren’t enough, I’ve been trampled under the hooves of a thousand horses and burned alive at the stake—twice. But I don’t die, Dr. Rose. Ever.”

“Yes, I know.” She closed the manila folder and laid it on top of her desk. Then she entered something into her laptop laid open next to where she set the file. “As you’ve mentioned before, you black out at the exact moment of each *death* and then magically awaken somewhere else. No wounds, no pain. Nothing.”

“Yes, exactly!”

“And you *always* look the same.” A slight grin tugged on the upper corners of her lips. “Same scars, same old moles, same dark hair. Everything, including your blue eyes, remains the same.”

“Yes.”

“When you wake up, you do so as if from a deep sleep... sometimes days later. Sometimes weeks, or even longer. Didn’t you once state that one time several years had passed?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling my irritation grow. Maybe I would cut short our visit myself. “Glad to see you’ve been taking such copious notes, doc.”

She nodded thoughtfully, which gave me a moment to reflect on a few of my death/rebirth instances. One of the worst deaths took place in England, back in 1454. Branded unfairly as a heretic, I had just procured silver piece number six. My sentence was severe, and I was to be stretched on a rack and strangled repeatedly to the point of death and brought back to full consciousness. Then, in the Tower of London's courtyard, I was to be disemboweled and beheaded.

Having gone through all of these tortures before, I really looked forward to getting to do them all at once! All sarcasm aside, the experience was far worse than I could have ever anticipated, forced to clutch the silver coin between my buttocks. I thought for sure I would lose it before my essence's transportation elsewhere took place. Fortunately, I died before the executioner had finished cranking out my small intestine.

Interestingly, I ended up in the New World, in an Appalachian forest. Still nearly fifty years before the European invasion would begin in earnest, the Cherokees soon accepted me as one of their own. I've often wondered if it was the reason why the native tribes were more trusting of the unscrupulous whites that arrived after I migrated back to Europe in 1500. Perhaps they thought everyone from the Old World bore an agreeable temperament like mine.

And the coin? It was waiting for me inside my left hand when I awoke in America. After I had recovered another coin left by an earlier Viking visit to the area that is now Virginia, I counted my blessings that I only had twenty-three more to find. If only I'd known then that I'd still be on the same journey looking for the rest of my bounty five-hundred years later.

"So, tell me what happens to your old bodies?"

I could tell from her widening grin that she was trying harder to trap me in some sort of paradox.

"My old bodies?"

"Yes, you know... the ones you leave behind?"

"Ah yes... I've often wondered about that as well," I confessed. "And sometimes I've even investigated what became of the old me. What I've discovered when I did bother to investigate any of my deaths is something very curious."

She leaned forward, eyeing me with the expectancy of a little girl. Perhaps it's the innocent Evelyn Rose trapped somewhere inside the pragmatic adult. Fingers poised over her laptop, this was new information to her and she was intently bent on collecting it.

But I wasn't ready to deliver...not just yet. A cliffhanger might do her some good, and maybe soften up her cynical side a bit. I pointed to the clock upon the wall closest to me.

"Sorry, but it looks like our time is up for today."

Words she'd normally say, and the irony wasn't lost upon her.

"You are... you *are* such a devil!" she declared, and the smile she wore right then as she shook her head seemed genuine. A mixture of surprise and admiration... at least admiration for the psychotic storyteller, I believe. Or, maybe it was appreciation for the tailored navy suit I chose to wear that day, where normally I prefer the casual dress styles of the past forty years.

"I haven't been called that in awhile." I stood up to leave. "But at least it gives us something new to talk about when I return from my trip." I straightened my coat

sleeves while watching her admiring gaze sizing me up, lingering the longest at my svelte waist. If nothing else, the suit didn't hurt the storyteller's allure.

"Your trip? Where to this time?" Dr. Rose blushed.

She stood up to show me the door. But I motioned that it wasn't necessary—despite the prospect of one more glance at her sultry saunter, likely enhanced by her sudden arousal.

"To the Middle East, doc." I reached for the door handle. "To the very home of the devil... or at least one I know quite well."

Another precious look from her, this time it included a dash of naughtiness. It fit perfectly, I think, with the playful wink I gave her while exiting her office.

Chapter 4

"Get in!"

The gruff male voice resounded beside me, after the black sedan screeched to a halt in front of my Acura. Normally, such an event would draw a protective response from the museum parking garage's attendants. But their station sat empty, and most of the Smithsonian employees had already left for the day.

Working a few hours late probably wasn't the wisest idea. But after my late start to the day, things had piled up quickly. Not to mention the extra half hour it took to confirm Alistair's and my flight arrangements with our preferred travel agent on such short notice, along with the necessary hotel and rent-a-car bookings in Iran.

"Must you guys always play it rough?" I responded, my tone impishly cheerful. I tried to peer into the back of the sedan through the driver's side window. The darkly tinted windows made it difficult to identify the lone passenger sitting behind the driver.

"Just shut the hell up and get your ass in the car!" the driver snapped. A burly middle-aged man whose sullen scowl announced a sour disposition, his cracked teeth formed an uneven fence inside his mouth as he sneered. Dark sunglasses prevented me from confirming the same depth of malice in his eyes.

"Lay off him, Ted," said a familiar voice from the backseat. "I'm sure William knows why we're here."

"Mike?"

"Yes, William, it's me." The owner of the voice leaned forward. "Going to Iran, huh?"

"How'd you find out so soon?"

I'm not easily impressed, but I had just finished talking to my travel agent twenty minutes earlier. I marveled at how quickly the news had traveled to my CIA liaison. Then again, he does work for the primo spy group in the world.

"This time it was more about the itinerary destination than anything else." Mike's thick salt and pepper hairline glistened in the sedan's dimness. I also saw the glow from freshly fitted veneers—a testament to Michael Lavoie's supreme vanity. His previous set of pearly whites was no worse for wear than the set of teeth my son's buddy, Harold Mathis, owned. "No one makes a reservation for Tehran these days and escapes notice."

The back passenger door on the driver's side suddenly opened.

"Please... join me for a little chat," said Mike.

"Sure."

I couldn't help but chuckle—especially after noting the driver named Ted continued to eye me with deep contempt. He shook his head disgustedly as I slid into the backseat.

"Where's Chuck?" The door locks immediately clicked shut and Ted's window rolled up. I envisioned how uncomfortable this would make things for most folks. For me, it was just added incentive to keep our conversation light. "I guess it isn't easy keeping good help these days, is it?"

I laughed at my own joke, although the big fella in the front seat didn't take kindly to my playful jab. All the more merriment for me!

"Charley's on a luxury cruise ship in the Caribbean this week." Mike glanced weakly toward the front seat, where Ted glowered back at us through the rearview mirror.

Unperturbed, I smiled and nodded at him while my best friend working for the United States government turned his attention back to me. Mike's vanity far surpasses anything I can recall encountering since King Herod in Judea so many centuries ago. The Armani pinstripe suit and black-saddle loafers by Gucci far outclassed even the tailored suit I wore that day. And a closer look at Mike's face revealed recent laser treatments to erase the latest fine lines around his eyes and mouth.

The man is undeniably afraid of Father Time. It's sometimes hard to believe he works for a secretive government. With all the primping and preening Michael insists upon, he hardly fits the profile for a spy—much less the boss of a small army of miscreants steeped in espionage. I figure his infectious charms are what have gotten him this far in life. When I've been near him at the D.C. spring and fall galas, I often see a heated sparkle glistening within his deep-set brown eyes. Women love this perpetual playboy bachelor nearing his forty-fifth birthday. Well, I'm sure they love him until they learn how deep his narcissism runs.

"Oh... so this is the best the temp agency could do in the meantime?" My playful barb brought an angrier glare from Ted.

"Let's get to why you're here," said Mike, coolly, motioning for his driver to turn away from us while he scooted closer to me with his open laptop. "I'm calling on another return favor to do a little surveillance for us while you vacation in Iran. Just a couple days of actual work between exploring the Alborz Mountains or catching some rays on the better beaches along the Caspian Sea."

His turn to poke some humor, I suppose, since he knows full well that I'm not interested in having traditional fun when I travel. He may not know exactly what I'm looking for, but he appreciates my passion for exploring ancient sites around the world. It most certainly is why he approached me nearly sixteen years ago to help him out—to run a few extra errands when abroad as a way *to pay the U.S. of A. for the privilege of globetrotting unfettered*. That's really the way he put it.

So, from time to time I have helped out. Usually it's easy tasks such as capturing a few photographs or stealing a quick look inside secure files. Things I'm especially adept at. However, every once in a while there is more danger involved. And yes, I have been forced to kill someone before. It was in self-defense. But if not

for being put in a precarious position—the *wrong* time and place by Mr. Lavoie—it wouldn't have happened. I've worried ever since what might come next in terms of favors requested by the *U.S. of A.*

"I'm traveling with Alistair. So, just as long as whatever you want doesn't put his safety at risk I'd love to hear what you have in mind." I moved closer to get a better view of the image on his laptop screen.

"As if traveling to Iran is on the same level as visiting Waikiki." He pushed the laptop closer to me. "Petr Stanislav is the subject's name. Perhaps you're familiar with him in some way?"

The image on the screen actually was familiar. A typical Stanislav male: prominent brow, blonde bushy hair, and intense gray eyes. That along with a big-boned stature, as it appeared the stout middle-aged man on the screen was at least six-feet five inches in height...maybe even bigger, since the juniper shrub in the foreground could be somewhat shorter than it appeared. Same scowl that his grandfather often wore, and even a little like the expression worn by the family's patriarch several centuries earlier. Romanov third cousins at one time, it meant Petr's net worth should be many millions—based on my dealings with Vladimir Stanislav in the mid nineteenth century.

"I see it in your eyes, William—you know this man, don't you?"

Mike could scarcely contain his excitement. Or, maybe it was more a sense of relief, knowing whatever he wanted in regard to this person was now an easier sell. His eyes glistened in the backseat's dimness, illuminated by the laptop's glow.

"Yes, I know the family..." I paused to study Petr's image again. "If he's anything like his father, this man should be up to his ears in weapons and selling anything he can under the table. He certainly has the millions to do it with."

"Try billions," Mike advised, drawing a surprised look from me. "Twenty-eight billion to be exact, which makes him one of the wealthiest people in the world—and one of the most dangerous."

"Is he dealing arms to Iran?"

"We're not sure. He's been spending a lot of time in Iran during the last few months, especially to the north."

"Maybe he's trying to get in on the oil reserves before the rest of the world tries to make peace with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

I allowed myself a short chuckle as I pictured the array of Islamic hoops Mr. Stanislav would certainly have to go through to become best buddies with the current Iranian president. Say goodbye, Petr, to your family's longstanding affection for the Russian Orthodox faith. Won't that be fun!

"Possibly, since his family has long held an interest in procuring the lion share from what the Baku oil fields yield annually... But it might be more than minerals and raw resources he's after," said Mike. "I mentioned the Alborz Mountains for a reason. Whether it is oil shale or mineral deposits he's after, our satellites have spotted some heavy machinery. All of the equipment has either been transported from Russia via the Caspian Sea, or funded through other sources and then delivered to the mountains."

"So... it's all free enterprise shit that you're worried about, correct? And, as easy as it is to gather that kind of information, why do you need anyone to risk life and limb for it?"

Really, I'd be willing to take a moment to check out this Stanislav guy on my own. I'm always curious about the silly projects in which the rich and powerful immerse themselves. Even if it were just for a day while Alistair and I were in Iran, I'd love to see what kind of equipment and crews had been brought to the Alborz.

"There is one other thing... and it's pretty weird," Mike confided. He lowered his voice as if this wasn't something intended for Teddy the ugly-toothed driver's ears. "In all likelihood, Petr Stanislav is simply procuring minerals to further his wealth—something we're not happy with but it's definitely legal. But, several sources have confirmed another possible motive."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

Here's where I expected to hear about high-tech weaponry or mineral hoarding.

"He's searching for the Garden of Eden—literally."

The somber look on his face made me want to burst out laughing. Absurd notion, and a tough deal to swallow... and I did snicker slightly.

"I'm serious," he said, indignantly. Just like that, the twinkling light in his brown eyes fizzled and faded. "Stanislav apparently thinks it's hidden inside one of the mountains."

"Inside a mountain? That's a new one... But even if that were true, he's in the wrong country. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers are in Iraq."

"Yes, they are." Mike's tone iced a little after my stating the obvious. "Apparently Stanislav has obtained an ancient Tibetan text that mimics the older books of the Hebrew Talmud... except the rivers are different. According to our sources in St Petersburg, he has determined through painstaking translations that the actual rivers to the eternal garden have changed location and flow paths over the millennia. The rivers as they are known today are the southern thrust of the Volga River from the north; the Amu Darva, or Oxus, from the east; and the Kura River from the west."

"Don't they all empty into the Caspian Sea?" I couldn't contain my second derisive snicker.

"Yes, they do," said Mike, whose irritated look announced he was no longer in the mood for my jokes that evening. "This means, of course, that a *Garden of Eden* or *any* other kind of garden couldn't exist, since it would be submerged under water. And we know the Caspian Sea was formed more than five million years ago. Thus, at first glance it seems completely unlikely the inscribed papyri obtained by Stanislav is accurate."

"So it seems," I agreed, hoping that a confirmation of his point would lessen the ire directed at me. "What's the connection between this and digging in the mountains?"

"It's inferred from other details mentioned within the Tibetan legend." Mike's eyes were aglow again, and his expression was almost Cheshire in its knowingness. "Although not specific, the garden's location is somewhere between the Black Sea and the Aral Sea. Both seas are referred to by different names. Along with a reference to a 'great body of water' that marks the eastern boundary of the sacred garden, Stanislav narrowed down an area of one hundred square kilometers."

"That still puts him no closer to his quest than where we're sitting right now from the Jersey Turnpike," I said. Probably should've held off on that one...

especially since mean Teddy and irritable Mikey glared in unison this time. “Okay, so there’s still more than what meets the eye, right?”

“Yes,” said Mike, tersely. He again motioned for his driver to turn around and mind his own business. “As luck would have it, another ancient document—this one Persian—asserts a location somewhere in the Alborz, just south of the Mazandaran Sea, which is one of the oldest names for—”

“The Caspian Sea or *Gilan*,” I interrupted him, unable to resist a good old fashioned pissing contest by stating another ancient name for the Caspian. It might seem childish and rude, but I had to chill him out before he went on a tangent and turned this into one of his patented lectures. By my estimation I just saved myself a five-minute speech about some needless bullshit. “It still doesn’t explain how the damned place ended up inside a mountain.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

The frown Mike wore confirmed his deepening displeasure with me and my cavalier mouth. Yet, his expression also held the promise I’d soon be set free. Free to commiserate with my son about how our treasure hunting vacation had just been hijacked and transformed into an Iranian wild goose chase.

“Suffice it to say, since you’ve been such good company tonight, the rest of your briefing will take place at a later time... one determined by my choosing,” he said, and then stiffly nodded to his surly chauffeur that it was time to release the door locks so I could exit the sedan.

“I’m leaving first thing Friday and will be retiring early tomorrow evening, to get my beauty rest.” I said this in case he was planning a similar round to this one at some ungodly late hour—he’s done that before.

“Why of course... I have your itinerary right here.”

I hated his knowing smirk.

Was some surprise still in the works? Or, did my mention of beauty sleep touch his deeply ingrained fear of aging? I should advise here that Mike generally views me as a freak of nature and as somebody with a closely guarded secret health routine to beat the aging process and look perpetually thirty-ish. If only he knew the truth. Getting lots of sleep isn’t part of it, since I rarely require more than a few hours of rest at any one time.

“We are expecting your full cooperation on this, William.” He closed his laptop. “If you play your cards right, I’ll make sure you have enough time to snorkel in the Caspian—or for what other mischief you and Alistair can concoct.”

“I guess we’ll see how it goes,” I said, and then stepped out of the sedan.

I waited to get inside my Acura until the sedan had exited the garage and moved on to whatever next appointment Mike had. Listening closely for anything else, I felt strangely comforted by the deserted parking garage’s silence. I tried to visualize what might lie ahead, and found myself drawn most to what Petr Stanislav and his crazy quest for the Garden of Eden might entail. I decided the man must be crazy, alright... but no worse than some guy searching the world for his lost thirty pieces of silver.

Chapter 5

I didn't sleep well that night. Especially after I relayed the latest news to my son regarding the assignment we'd been given for our trip to Iran. Not that I ever sleep long as it is...but it was much less than usual.

"You should see if we can cancel our reservations and forego this nonsense!" Alistair told me on the phone. The only good thing was I didn't interrupt his dinner, decreasing the chance of an acid reflux attack. "It makes a helluva lot more sense to reschedule for the fall break—or even next spring if necessary. No rush for getting school agendas completed on time, and no Russian billionaires to hobnob with in the frigging Alborz Mountains!"

There wasn't much I could say since they were my exact sentiments, initially. But his irritation greatly exceeded mine, forcing me to pull the phone away from my ear.

"Yes, if given the chance to redo this whole adventure, I would concur with you." I tried to sound caring while presenting an alternative point of view. "But the 'die has been cast', so to speak, Ali my boy. We're going."

"The hell you say!"

"Yes, the *hell* I say! I'm your father and you'll just have to trust me that this will work out!" Now I was the one a little ticked off. "I'll still find a way for us to head north to our destination. I promise!"

"To Al-h—"

"*Sh-h-h-h!*"

"What the hell's the matter now??"

"You damned well know what!" I chided him, although by then I had lowered my voice to a harsh whisper. "I'd rather not give away the rest of our itinerary, if you don't mind, son!"

Every phone line we've ever had has been bugged over the years.

"Bah! Pops, only you'd be so arrogant to think everyone on the planet wants to know what the 'Great William Barrow' is up to these days!"

Awkward silence followed, and I wasn't sure what to say next. Apparently, Alistair faced the same problem.

"I saw Mother today," he finally announced.

"How is she?" I felt a sudden lump form in my throat.

"Not so good, Pops." His tone bore profound sadness. I doubt this world has seen devotion for one's mother any stronger than the love Alistair holds for his mom. "She's remembering less and less...the nurse told me that she no longer wanders down the hallways at night." He chuckled sadly.

"I'll be sure to stop by Good Shepherd tomorrow after I get off from work. I'm planning to read her favorite passage from *Pride and Prejudice*."

"I don't know, Pops." He sniffed. "I'd like to think she'd enjoy your company, but she didn't seem to know who I was tonight. She might not even believe you're her long lost grandson this time—probably not even if I came with you and told her that you're my boy."

"I'm sure she'll be fine with me, son," I sought to assure him, my tone soothing and confident. "And if my presence agitates Beatrice in any way, I promise I'll leave quietly. She won't even know I'm there, unless it's a positive experience for her."

"You swear?"

Another image of my kid as a little boy suddenly filled my mind, and now it was my turn to chuckle, although warmly.

“Yes, I swear. Ali, it’s going to be fine.”

“Well, okay.” He sounded a tad hopeful. “I look forward to our evening chat tomorrow night.”

“Good night, son.”

“Night, Pops.”

After he hung up, I stared out my living room window at the twinkling D.C. skyline for nearly half an hour. A powerful sense of sadness overwhelmed me as I reflected on all that I had been through in the past century... what it was like before I met Beatrice, and how she changed my life and perpetual existence forever. I pictured her so clearly... when she was a young and beautiful woman with bright green eyes and long flowing strawberry blonde hair, and a smile that easily melted my steeled heart. Back then, my Georgetown professor son was just a young kid pretending to be Buck Rogers out in the backyard of our home in the outskirts of Glasgow.

My wife and kid embodied such joy and happiness, and our lives seemed so complete. I’ll never forget the extreme pain I endured when I left them—how it literally destroyed me inside to do what I had to do. To do what I had done so many times before in the previous nineteen hundred years of my existence.

Sometimes I’m not sure which is worse. Is it the terrible loneliness I’ve become so familiar with over the centuries in my solitude? Or, is it more the inevitable goodbyes when those I cherish finally succumb to old age and death?

Beatrice would be leaving soon. All the more reason to spend as much time as possible by her side.

* * * * *

“She’s sleeping, William. Maybe you should come back tomorrow in the daytime.”

Thursday evening after work, and a woman I greatly admire was trying to shoo me away from my wife’s room. Of course, this lady, Nurse Larisa Jones, has no idea to this day that the young man standing before her is not actually Beatrice Barrow’s grandson. I can only imagine the shock this portly middle-aged caregiver would experience if she were to learn I was her favorite patient’s husband instead.

I had no intentions of ever telling her.

“I promise to be quiet,” I said softly, and for good measure flashed the devilish smile I’m known for. “I’ll only be here for a little while. Dad and I are headed overseas early tomorrow morning.”

“Oh? Where would you two be off to now?”

My charm was working. Larisa’s golden brown eyes seemed to glow within her youthful ebony complexion as she chuckled and shook her head.

“You ain’t going to China or Japan this time, are you?”

“No, not this time.” I no longer worried that my wife’s nurse would stop me from entering her private room in the Good Shepherd nursing home. I pushed gently on the door’s latch and quietly opened the door. “We’re heading to Europe.”

A little white lie, though technically we would be stopping over in Frankfurt before continuing to Tehran. But, the sooner I could weasel myself into a chair next to my wife's bed, the better my chances of getting to stay for an hour or so.

"You two go out that way a lot, don't you? Can I come along the next time you jet-set to the French Riviera??"

These seemed more like polite questions. I already had one foot through the door, and she had turned to continue her rounds through the building's second floor.

"Sure, if you can squeeze it into your schedule." I kept my voice low, to not disturb my wife. Still, I managed a seductive wink—all in good fun, of course.

"Um-umm, well we'll see about that!" I heard her laugh to herself as she moved down the hallway, along with an echoed *I'm gonna hold you to it!*

My playful distraction successful, I felt confident I would have at least an uninterrupted hour with Beatrice. I moved over to the right side of my wife's bed and gently scooted my chair to where I sat less than a few feet from where she lay. At the moment, she slept soundly. Part of me was saddened that our visit would likely go unnoticed by her. But the smoothness in her breathing gave me hope that her rest would be a healing period for her tired body and would prolong her time on earth. I wanted to be there when she passed, and prayed silently that it wouldn't happen while Alistair and I were out of the country.

And why would I care so much when I had exited her life once before? Good question. Really it is.

I left her after nearly ten years of marriage. Those ten years were the best years of my entire existence. We were in love... and a love deeper than any I have known before or since. Our love transcended anything I ever had experienced—something beyond sex and longing. A level of knowing and understanding that I've often wondered if it is the thing so loosely thrown around these days: Soul mates.

But if soul mates, then what in the hell was I thinking when I left? After all, even today I love her just as much as I ever have.

I turned chicken shit. But chicken shit with a compelling reason. As much as I loved her—and knew I would *always* love her—I also realized I'd be in a world of terrible despair for eventually having to leave Beatrice, when she aged and I did not. Things have ended badly every time I've hung on too long, and it's not usually me who has the initial urge to leave. Most of the time it's been the person I love who has insisted on getting away from me, as if I'm some unnatural demon in the flesh—an unacceptable anomaly and cruel joke by nature.

The pain of such separation has damned near been unbearable. Imagine my fear of what this could mean if Beatrice rejected me, my only true love? The very fires of hell would be a comfort in comparison to what that would mean for me.

I staged a fiery car crash near Birmingham, England back in September 1957, using a purchased cadaver. This was long before forensic medicine would have uncovered my ruse. I watched from afar as the woman and son I loved more than anything grieved terribly. And I grieved too... I just thought foolishly another man would enter their lives as a husband and father, and they would eventually forget about me.

It never happened... at least not in time to make a difference in their lives. Even when I tried to prod potential suitors into Beatrice's path, or befriend my son, it

didn't work. Believe it or not, it's worked many times before in centuries past. Just not this time.

Damn soul mates!

Anyway, I would've banished myself to a permanent absence if Alistair had stayed on the right path. But after he and his mother immigrated to the United States in 1968, he started down a path to personal ruin, where booze, drugs, and unscrupulous friends and fast women threatened to destroy a promising career in academics. By 1983, my beloved son was on the verge of being thrown out onto the streets. Despite the risks to both him and me emotionally, I reintroduced myself at that point into his life. At first he saw me only as a benevolent stranger. But I eventually presented enough clues to where he was forced to consider the impossible. The friend who appeared to be a few years younger than him was in reality his father—a man supposedly dead for nearly thirty years.

He wanted so badly to tell his mother about me, but after an ongoing argument that lasted the better part of one full summer, he finally saw how damaging this knowledge could be to her. By then she had remarried, and although Alistair convinced me that she didn't love the man, it seemed incredibly cruel—and rude—for me to pop back into her world and say, "Hey, sweetie, I'm home!"

So, my son and I have spent the past twenty-eight years rebuilding our bond with each other, and skirting around her. Often times, I've felt as if she knew I was near—especially back in the days when I would watch her as she worked in her favorite garden. I'd catch her looking around herself and smiling—even though no one else was around. After her second husband passed in 1992, I have made an even greater effort to be near.

You're probably wondering if I've ever accosted her before the onset of Alzheimer's. Surely you can picture the perpetually young man walking up to the elderly lady in public. I did that just once, at a grocery store in Clemson, South Carolina, where Alistair was finishing his doctoral work. She glanced at me, and our eyes met for a moment. But when I smiled, a look of recognition suddenly came over her, and I realized immediately this was all I ever wanted. At the same time, the shocked and sad expression upon her face let me know I could never do this again. I've always hoped that she chalked it up to old age and shrugged off the incident. Since Alistair has never mentioned it, I believe she's never told him.

But, back to the present... Beatrice shifted in her bed, ever so slightly once I sat down. I'd like to believe she still senses when I'm near, as I've gotten this response before when I've sat down close to her while she sleeps. When conscious, even though her mind is fragmented, she smiles when she looks at me. If not for the usual *Alistair, who is this young man?*, I'd find it easy to believe she still recognizes me on some level...

"My love, Alistair and I will be gone for a couple of weeks," I said softly, confident that she would hear me in her sleep, and watchful should she awake and think some pervert had snuck into her room. "Don't go. Stay here and rest... we will be back before you know it."

A subtle groan escaped her throat, one that for a moment belied her age. Was it the sound of her heart's longing?

That's how I chose to interpret it.

After watching her sleep for a while longer, I read her favorite passage from *Pride and Prejudice*. Beatrice wore a slight smile on her lips while I read to her, and when I got up to leave I reached over and took her hand in mine. I squeezed it gently.

“Hang on for me, please... wait to leave until I return.”

She looked so frail, though she had aged gracefully until the last few years. I searched her pale and withered face for a response, but other than a light flutter under her eyelids there wasn't one. But her peaceful countenance was enough for me. After all, her fingers gently squeezed mine.

Chapter 6

I should've known.

When Michael Lavoie never contacted me before our scheduled departure from Dulles International Airport, I should've expected him to pull some shenanigans.

Yes, I admit part of this was my fault. I could've done a much better job of zipping my mouth and avoiding the urge to strut my cavalier side during Wednesday evening's sedan conversation. But, he could've shown us—both Alistair and myself—some common manners and not diverted our travel plans. Granted, getting an upgrade from standard first class on Delta to luxury pods on a chartered Emirates flight must be taken into consideration before I go off on Mike the next time we see each other. Not to mention we'd reach our destination several hours earlier by flying to Dubai instead of Frankfurt. Then on to Tehran after the jet refueled.

“I was hoping to visit Romerberg Square again, but I guess we'll now have to wait on that,” my son lamented once we got the news our flight reservations had been changed. We had just stepped into the line of travelers who bypassed standard check-in, when two of Mike's operatives accosted us and led the way to where the private jet awaited us. “Can you picture me shopping inside some glassed cathedral mall?”

“Why, yes, Ali I can,” I teased him, knowing his disdain for modern excess, which the famed modern malls, restaurants, and monuments in Dubai pay the highest homage to. “Maybe we can upgrade to some designer suitcases while we're there.”

“Humph! ... Perhaps *you'd* enjoy that, since it's looking less and less like an archeological venture and more like a cheesy espionage farce we've been recruited for!” His disgust drew brief over-the-shoulder glances from our two escorts dressed in dark business suits. The fact that Alistair and I were attired in khaki shorts and sandals made it obvious these two men hiding their identities behind tinted Raybans weren't exactly buddies of ours. My son continued undeterred. “I have a mind to talk to Michael about this cluster-fuck myself when we return to Washington!”

That brought a chuckle, though I kept it soft. No sense in pissing off anyone else associated with the CIA until we were far removed from any immediate

consequences. The walk to where the private boarding gate sat wasn't far. I was surprised I'd never noticed it before.

"Have you—"

"Yes, Pops, I've seen this gate before," Alistair interrupted me. This time he chuckled, despite his irritation that hadn't subsided. "In fact, I've noticed it several times the past few years. You might discover what wonders exist outside of your narrow focus, if you'll only pay a little more attention to the world around you!"

My son picked up his pace before I could respond with something clever. He nearly ran over our CIA attendants as they led us to the ticket counter.

"Why the frigging hurry, Ali?" I still wore an impish expression, despite his grumpiness and stern little digs.

A beautiful young woman of Middle Eastern descent smiled warmly and greeted us from behind the counter. I barely caught her name—Kali—before she immediately left her post to lead us all down the covered walkway to the airplane. No ticket check-in that day... just skip ahead and pass *GO* and collect two hundred dollars without having to roll the dice. Swweeeett!

Well, considering that our present CIA escorts were still with us, maybe not so much.

"*Why the frigging hurry, you ask?*" Alistair scolded me over his shoulder. "Except for you, everyone else seems as anxious to get this misadventure over and done with as much as I am!"

His irritated Scottish brogue at its best, it drew snickers from the two agents, proving they at least carried human pulses after all. Meanwhile, the cute stewardess named Kali urged us to keep up with her on our short trek to the plane.

Was I the only one in vacation mode, I wondered? Granted, we had an appointment with some crazy Russian billionaire willing to waste his cash on a quest for the Garden of Eden. Not a tremendous amount of fun to be had, but still...

As soon as we actually boarded the jet two more dark haired beauties greeted us, named Pirma and Serena. All three females could pass as sisters. Not sure if they were from Dubai, or perhaps somewhere deeper in the Gulf region. The shape of their big deep brown eyes looked Jordanian. If nothing else, their charms effectively cooled my boy's ire. Meanwhile, one of the 'suits' made a call on his radio, and then I heard him add, "We're ready for her... send her to the plane."

"So, who's joining our Iranian party?" I glanced to my left where the cockpit sat. To my right were two rows of luxury passenger pods. This clearly wasn't an American airplane. "I doubt the Ayatollah would approve of this. Don't you guys?"

Although my question was directed toward the two men representing the U.S. government, who suddenly stiffened, the girls giggled shyly. The one named Pirma shot me a flirtatious wink... might be a little fun to be had on the way to the Arab coast.

"If this person we're waiting on is a striking female, she might not appreciate being compared to some old bearded guy with an Aladdin turban." Alistair chuckled as he stepped over to the closest pod to set his flight bag down in the plush leather seat. His ill mood had lifted. "I'd like to see how your considerable charms work with this information as prior knowledge. I'll lay down a Jackson

that says you'll never see first base." He glanced playfully at me after relieving his shoulder of the bag's weight.

"I'll trump you with a Hamilton that not only says I'll win, but that first base will be her idea!"

More snickers from the CIA duo, and bigger smiles from the ladies. Everyone, it seems, loves a guy who can effectively flirt.

"You're on!" my son fired back, and I detected a glint of supreme satisfaction in his eyes that suddenly looked beyond where I stood. "Looks like it won't take long to find out the verdict."

"The verdict on what?"

My head whipped around at the sound of the voice... lush, genteel, with a hint of another language long since forgotten.

"That, my dear lady, has yet to be decided!" I pictured my charms surrounding the woman standing before me, and all at once swooping in under her defense system—should she have one. "I'm William Barrow, and this is my father, Alistair Barrow. Perhaps you've already met these other two gentlemen?"

I motioned to our escorts, who had never made their introductions known to us. All they had said when they accosted Alistair and me was that Michael Lavoie sent them; in order to make sure we boarded the right airplane. Being a bit put off by Michael's further intrusion to my travel plans, I didn't give a shit about ingratiating myself with these guys.

But in truth, I was now looking for a way to buy time... a distraction to pull this female's attention from me long enough to get a handle on what my son and I would be dealing with. Obviously, she would be traveling with us. Her carry-on bags announced that much. Expensive designer, they matched the smart pantsuit and Prada heels. But it was the part not covered up that drew my attention and quickened my pulse. No, not her low cut blouse plainly visible through her light beige dress coat. That wasn't it. Rather, her stunning face—especially her emerald eyes—framed by full flowing locks of raven-black hair that surprised me most.

More alluring than any woman I'd seen in decades—excluding my beloved Beatrice, of course. It must be the bright green eyes... I'm a sucker for the females that have them.

"I am Amy Golden Eagle," she said, eyeing me knowingly as if she could clearly define my silent musings. "Michael sent me to accompany you and your father to Iran."

Indian... and not just based on the name and darker complexion. Not unlike the other females in attendance, but different still. Not Middle Eastern in descent, and not from India. She was an *American* Indian, or if you will, a Native American.

"So you work for the CIA?" Alistair moved back toward us with an impressed expression upon his face. "Any chance you're related to the late Stephen Golden Eagle, the famed anthropologist?"

"Yes," she said. The two CIA agents moved over and took her flight bag and laptop from her, setting them in the pod across from where Alistair set his bag. "He was my father."

Such a small world... at least between these two. It was time for me to join the party.

“Blackfoot,” I said, pausing to loosen the straps to my backpack that held everything I’d need other than clothing changes for the next two weeks. Including my latest razor-thin MAC laptop.

“Why yes, I am.” She sounded surprised. “Tony and Dan...let the pilots know we’re ready to leave. Michael is waiting for you both in the short term parking lot.”

I waited for her to continue. She waited for the agents to disappear inside the cockpit.

“You are as observant as Michael advised you would be,” she said to me, motioning for Alistair and me to join her in the pods. The three stewardesses acknowledged her head nod, and removed the dividers between our seating areas to where we could easily converse with one another. “Golden Eagle is the English translation for *Peta*.”

“Like the animal rights group?” My son wore a wry, enamored smile. Her presence had the same effect on him as on me. Only in Alistair’s case, humor with an intelligent edge was the driver behind his flirtations.

“Yes, exactly.” She smiled warmly at him.

I could already tell she had her guard up for me. If Alistair were twenty years younger, I might try to set him up with her. By my guess, Ms. Golden Eagle was in her mid to late twenties, just four or five years younger than the age my physical appearance would indicate.

“You’ll be taking off in a few minutes, so please take your seats,” advised one of the CIA men, a blonde with a receding hairline. It was the only distinguisher I had for determining who was who. Suits, shoes, and sunglasses were damned near identical. Just the hair color—one brown and the other blonde—and the forehead coverage were different.

“All right, Dan.” Amy motioned for us to join her in taking our seats. “Tell Michael thanks again.”

“Sure.”

The agents exited the plane and the three stewardesses moved to their positions. Alistair and I had flown together many, many times over the years. But being on a plane like this—on a luxury flight where the atmosphere was more like visiting the lounge of a fine five-star restaurant—was a completely new experience. Alistair’s child-like grin told me his anticipation of what takeoff would be like on this aircraft rivaled the excitement that fueled the smile I felt spreading across my face. Meanwhile, Ms. Golden Eagle seemed unfazed, as if she were an Emirates frequent flyer.

“So, do you work for the CIA in some capacity?”

I repeated Alistair’s earlier question after our surprisingly smooth takeoff. The tallest buildings in the D.C. skyline were behind us with just the deep blue Atlantic below. Alistair’s seat was directly in front of hers while mine was across the aisle from them both. All of us had a window-view close by.

“No, I don’t,” she said, removing her seatbelt. She relaxed in her leather chair, releasing the restraints so that it swiveled freely and allowed her to face me directly. “Michael is a family friend. When he heard you guys were headed to Iran he called me and asked if I’d be willing to join you. It provides the perfect cover for me to get close to Petr Stanislav.”

I certainly didn't expect to hear that. No more than I expected a woman in designer clothes to assist me and my son in our assigned espionage. Of course, I still lacked specifics about what Alistair and I were supposed to do for our beloved country this time around.

"Then what is your vocation? I take it your father's aspirations didn't carry down to his children."

Alistair sounded disappointed, though not with disdain. I think it was a reflection of how he'd feel if his kid never pursued something of an academic bent as he has. Yes, Alistair does have a kid... somewhere. The boy's probably in his forties by now, and the child was born out of a tryst with a junkie/prostitute in the early 1970s. I could find out more information about him if I desired to know badly enough. But something inside tells me that it wouldn't be positive news for Alistair—something very tragic about this unknown progeny. Since Alistair has never spent the effort to track down his kid, I haven't done so either.

"My brother followed in his footsteps." Amy shifted in her seat, letting me know the mention of her brother was uncomfortable territory for her. "Jeremy followed up on all of Dad's research once he completed his doctoral work at Cambridge."

"Ah, I remember reading something about him, come to think of it." Alistair leaned forward and held his right hand as if it contained an imaginary pipe. "So what about you?"

"I followed the same career path to MIT, but it didn't take with me. At least not long enough," she explained. "So, when I graduated, I decided to go to law school. After finishing up at Harvard and working for a well-known Fortune 500 company, I went solo... I now work mostly with upscale corporate clients as a freelance legal advisor, and the rest of my time is spent putting a strong enough case together to bring international actions against Mr. Stanislav."

"So this is why you're here—to serve him a subpoena?"

Believe it or not, I've found that a lighthearted comment like this can be a helpful icebreaker for some females. But, that sure isn't the case with an ice-chick carrying a valid axe to grind.

"Petr Stanislav killed my father and mother," she said, coolly, after turning to face me again. Anger turned her lovely green eyes a few shades darker. "After my father painstakingly spent five years translating an ancient Tibetan text for him, he had my parents tied to an anchor and thrown into the icy depths of the Baltic Sea!"

"I'm so sorry... I had no idea." I meant it, lowering my voice to a mere whisper.

Yes, the smart-ass smile also died just as quickly. Especially when my son mouthed *you owe me a Hamilton!*. Well, at least this explained why she was coming along with us. I didn't need to ask her if that's how she got Michael to give his okay. My biggest concern was how would she react if, and more likely when, we as a trio faced a bevy of assault weapons. Would she falter? Anger and bitterness will drive someone only so far... It took Alistair several near-death experiences before his nerves steeled enough to where he only lightly worries about the hazards of the job. It's merely a detestation of such bullshit for him now. Especially when a trip, like this one, could've been relatively free from such concerns.

“It’s okay. But I don’t want to talk about my parents anymore,” she said, and then turned her attention out the window closest to her.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why is it just you and not your brother that’s journeying to Tehran?” Alistair used his gentle persuasiveness to get her to engage us once more, after several minutes had passed in awkward silence.

“He did journey to Tehran... last year.” She kept her gaze focused out the window. I got the feeling she was near tears... holding it in, admirably. “He disappeared six months ago, right before Christmas. No one would help me try to locate him. When I approached the U.N., they said there was nothing they could do without proof of a crime. Even Michael couldn’t provide the necessary resources to launch a search for him... until you two came along.”

“Are you saying that your brother’s disappearance and Mr. Stanislav’s activities in the Alborz Mountains are related?”

My question drew an immediate look back to me from both my son and her.

“Yes, I believe they are related... in some way.” Amy’s eyes glistened with tears. “When he last wrote to me, just before Thanksgiving, he said Petr Stanislav had moved some massive trucks into the Alborz Mountains, and that it had something to do with the Tibetan manuscript that Dad worked on.”

“And that’s the last thing you heard from him?” I prodded her gently this time.

“Yes.”

“Did he ever mention anything about the Garden of Eden?”

Alistair posed this question. It surprised me a little since he thinks that aspect of this whole trip is complete nonsense. I hadn’t made up my mind one way or another. The place didn’t have to exist for some nutcase like Petr Stanislav to go looking for it.

“No... he didn’t,” she said. “It was Dad’s idea, that the real Garden of Eden existed somewhere either near or actually inside the mountain range. Despite my brother’s disbelief, I can picture him looking for whatever might be there in the Alborz Mountains. He wanted to vindicate our father’s work, one way or another...” She started to cry.

Alistair beat me to it. He moved over and cradled this beautiful woman in his arms while I looked on. Our thirteen-hour flight to Dubai had just started, and already we had a moment of drama. Or, I should say, surprises *and* drama.

Regardless of what would come next, having a woman along for our adventure had already changed the dynamics of our adventure. I just hoped Amy Golden Eagle’s high intelligence, beauty, and determination for justice would help us prevail over the wiles of Petr Stanislav. A villain whom we would soon discover was more cunning and ruthless than Alistair, I, and even our lovely companion would’ve ever imagined.

Chapter 7

Dubai should be dubbed the true *Emerald City*. Lots of polished steel, glistening glass windows, and a wealthy mixture of emancipated millionaire businessmen along with their robed brethren. Almost all are devoted to Islam and the fact we

arrived at 5:35 a.m. local time that Saturday morning meant we would likely be interrupting *Fajr*. For those unfamiliar with Islamic religious customs, that's the predawn prayer time for devotees to the world's largest 'practicing' religion.

I realize my assertion will certainly ruffle some feathers among the evangelical Christian zealots in the western world. But I'm talking about actual faithful followers and not the occasional churchgoers who make up the majority of Christendom. If one takes an objective view of the past two hundred years, modern progress has eroded the prestige that once flourished within the earthly kingdoms of Jesus Christ. The more modern miracles embraced by the human race, the less need for daily divine revelation to guide one's path to redemption. In other words, legends of a burning bush won't impress anybody who's held an iPhone in their hands. Perhaps when more technological distractions gain a stronger foothold in the eastern world, the score between Christians and Muslims will even out.

Which brings us back to Dubai, and what trillions of dollars and Euros funneled off the Arab oil fields has done for a group of people more comfortable with tents and camels less than two generations ago. And, yes, I should know. I've watched it happen with my own eyes.

"So, why must we accompany Ms. Golden Eagle to the Mall of the Emirates?"

Alistair was in a testy mood again when I roused him for the second time the next morning. The rising sun had already seized the lower eastern horizon, promising a scorcher for the desert city.

"Because you promised, don't you remember?" I found the whole affair amusing. The sordid events from last night, that is, when my boy and our gorgeous cohort talked at length about a variety of academic subjects, imbibing themselves continuously until three bottles of French chardonnay and a liter of champagne disappeared. "You told Amy, and I quote, *I'd give anything to see someone ski inside the Mall of the Emirates!*"

"I said that?"

The look on his face was absolutely precious—more than any other I'd seen lately. A mixture of confusion, scorn, disbelief, and in the end child-like recognition that revealed all too clearly the missteps in judgment brought on by alcohol excess. A lifelong commitment to bachelorhood left Alistair at such a dire disadvantage to a beautiful and charming woman talking his ear off. After the first few drinks, the flirtation went both ways while I quietly looked on.

A few drinks will rarely leave me the slightest bit tipsy. If anything, it just helps me sleep longer than the two to three hours of rest I normally manage. In truth, whenever necessary, I can skip sleep for days on end—sometimes as much as a week and a half. My body's regenerative powers not only keep me young and in robust health, but also make the normal necessity of rest obsolete. I doubt that anyone, other than another immortal, can imagine the discipline it takes to lay quietly night after night while other people sleep and my thoughts run rampantly.

"When will the plane continue on to Tehran?"

He sat up while reaching for his beloved day-planner that contained this information. Well, it did until I learned that our exhausted pilots would not be replaced at this juncture. Like my kid and his new gal pal, they needed their rest.

“Just after one o’clock this afternoon, once *Dhuhr* is over,” I said. “That allows plenty of time for the pilots to rejuvenate, and to see how silly you look skiing down the slopes of an indoor ski resort!”

I laughed heartily at his expense—especially after he frowned fearfully.

“But I’ve never skied in my life!” he fumed.

“Precisely!” I countered, gleefully. “All the more reason to get there as soon as possible!”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds!”

That was Ms. Golden Eagle. When we both turned to look at her, my son and I both gasped slightly. Radiantly beautiful. That’s what popped into my mind, anyway. Our luxury jet included a full bath, and her flowing curls were still damp from a recent shower. She was dressed in designer jeans and a blue silk blouse. Like a high classed debutante, she looked ready to do some serious shopping... but not so much the skiing she and Alistair had previously discussed.

“We may not have as much time to do everything we talked about last night.” She moved to the seat across from Alistair and placed her tote bag underneath. “I overheard the pilots say they expected to resume our journey at twelve-thirty this afternoon.”

“Well, it’s almost eight o’clock now. So if we get a move on it, we can decide on where and what to do over breakfast,” said Alistair, getting up from his seat.

He grimaced while stretching his back... always a little tight for him in the morning. He rubbed his temples while he leaned back, and I could tell he was fighting a headache, no doubt brought on by last night’s wine and champagne.

“Go ahead and take your shower and once you’re ready I’ll get cleaned up.” I thought it would be best for him to go first in hopes the water immersion might ease his physical discomfort. “In the meantime I’ll arrange for transportation to the mall.”

I thought I might encounter some resistance from our independent female, but she nodded approvingly for me to make the arrangements. With the assistance of the lovely Kali, I arranged for a taxi to be waiting for us outside the airport terminal. As soon as Alistair had showered and dressed, I took a quick shower. Attired in similar khaki shorts and a summer shirt to what my son wore, we exited the airplane flanking Amy on either side.

No doubt we looked a sight—two casual tourists with a fashion model in between. Other than a self-conscious glance by Alistair over his shoulder, we soon reached the taxi waiting for us. I must admit that I was quite impressed by Ms. Golden Eagle’s poise and ease in all of this. In no way a pompous bitch, she seemed to relish our company. Social time with the Barrow males was going well. But I looked forward to her reaction to the great outdoors when we all were roughing it in the Alborz wilderness in the next day or so.

“Take us to the Mall of the Emirates,” she told the driver, her tone sweet but with enough assertion to encourage our driver to get us there without delay.

Along the way, she pointed out the buildings and other sites the city is most proud of—most of them created within the last forty years. When we reached our destination, for a moment I worried about getting lost inside the immense structure. It’s the largest mall outside North America, and certainly the most posh shopping area in the world. Time could slip away easily in a place like this.

“Some of the finer restaurants are not far from here,” Amy advised, once we stepped inside the main entrance. “Or, we could pick something up in the food court ahead of us.”

“You’ve been here many times before, I take it,” I said, admiring the exquisite craftsmanship surrounding us. “What’s the best option that will allow us plenty of time to have a look around? I heard you tell the driver to come back for us at eleven-thirty.”

I glimpsed the fifty-dollar bill she handed him, too. American money spends just as well in Dubai as in the U.S. Anything smaller than a Grant might not have insured our driver’s cooperation—especially with Dhuhur coinciding with our return to our jet.

“Well, to avoid waiting for a table and what not, the food court would be quickest.” She smiled at us both while removing her sunglasses. Those beautiful eyes, again, set off magically by an impish glint. “If you’re still dying to hit the slopes, Ali, we’ll need time to get you outfitted with skis and a snowsuit.”

I guess they had gotten a little closer than I previously thought. My son has never cared too much for his nickname, and yet there she was addressing him like they had become best buddies. The age difference didn’t seem to affect her opinion about him, and although she had surely noticed my admiring glances, her attention paid to Alistair was on a different level. A *higher* level. One that completely escaped him, or perhaps he played it coy to avoid assuming too much. Lord knows he would hate looking like a dirty old man.

The lucky devil!

Not that I hadn’t enjoyed a few salacious flirtations with the trio of stewardesses while Amy and Alistair slept on the plane. Nothing serious, mind you. But the promise of something more was there for the taking—should I desire more than the mere pecks on my cheeks and forehead the three young ladies delivered. So many centuries of conquest and foreplay made so much of this boring for me. Yes, I never thought it would happen either... but it has happened. This only deepens my pain when I think about Beatrice in her nursing home bed... waiting to cross over to the other side.

“I don’t recall what I told you last night,” he said, sheepishly. “But surely there are other things we can do that don’t involve personal embarrassment to me.”

“Ah, come on, old man—you’ll have a blast!” I teased. I’m pretty sure my mischievous grin raised the ante on Amy’s look from a moment ago.

“Oh, yeah? The last time you said those words I almost fell into an active Chilean volcano!” Without waiting for us, he moved quickly toward the food court. “If either of you want to break your necks while riding a pair of wooden sticks, then be my guest. I’m sure I can find enough other distractions to keep me occupied until it’s time to go!”

Ms. Golden Eagle hurried to catch up to him, chuckling along the way.

“I’m just kidding!” I picked up my pace when the two of them made a beeline toward a breakfast vender. “Besides, we’ve got some patent leather luggage to hunt for!”

I heard him groan disgustedly before increasing his strides. He was all business now, with Amy scurrying to keep up with him. Meanwhile, I kept pace, but at a distance. I had just noticed three robed men watching us from the second floor

landing near the main escalators. One wore a distinctive ghutra that I recalled seeing at the airport. Perhaps it was nothing. But years of working undercover for the U.S. government had taught me to study consistencies versus inconsistencies within my surroundings. This skill could've saved me from several of my deaths in the early years of my existence.

In any case, I made a mental note of the men, being careful to keep my upward glances to a minimum. From the looks of things, neither my son nor the lovely lady gracing us with her presence had an idea anything was up. That was good... less to go wrong if everything progressed in a normal fashion.

"Hey, Pops, hurry up and join us!"

Huh?

Alistair motioned to a table near the middle of the food court. I casually walked over to them while they waited, catching a glimpse of the men moving closer to us from upstairs. Either they were watching us, or someone else, in the vicinity of the table Alistair and Amy had chosen.

"Go get something to eat and we can start discussing what to do next," said Alistair, to which Amy added a supportive nod.

"Pops?" I eyed him suspiciously.

I sauntered over to the breakfast burrito booth located right smack between a pizza place and McDonalds. Literally dozens of questions filled my mind while I waited for my bacon and egg wrap to be prepared. I repeated my simple question upon my return to the table.

"She knows, Pops," said Alistair, confirming my immediate fears. "She knows all about you, your real age, and even your quest for the final nine coins paid in exchange for Jesus Christ."

I laughed... uproariously. Really I did. I mean, wouldn't anybody? All the while, three men dressed in typical Saudi headdresses watched from a couple hundred feet away.

"He's telling you the truth," said Amy, evenly. "And I believe him. I believe you really are Judas—"

"Sh-h-h-h!!!"

I leaned toward her, ready to shut her mouth by force if necessary. I couldn't believe this was happening—especially in a fairly crowded mall with lots of shoppers around us. Granted, I had already attracted some attention with my sudden burst of laughter. Most of the people spoke in one form of Arabic or another, but I could damn well guarantee every one of them at least understood English. How I longed for Alistair to become proficient at Hebrew or Yiddish slang so we could discuss this matter in semi-privacy.

"You are *really* him." Amy eyed me coolly, though I'm sure more on account of my sternness than the revelation itself. "Based on everything he told me, it makes sense... especially when I consider some of the amazing things my father discovered and actually witnessed through his research."

"When did you tell her?"

I determined right then to keep my tone calmer. I was seething inside, since not even Michael or the rest of the CIA knew this information about me. My cover had just been blown by the only person I trusted.

“Last night,” he said, to which she again nodded confirmation. “Last night Amy and I shared some incredible information both ways, while you practically had your face inside the ample bosom of the girl named Pirma!”

Ooh, I forgot all about that... although I can assure it was nothing serious. No more scandalous than a gentleman getting a lap dance from a stripper.

“Okay... but why did you feel compelled to tell her about me, son?” I managed to reduce my voice to a harsh whisper while I casually looked around me. Keep it cool, William... don’t let on to the general public that anything’s amiss. Especially stay mindful of the gallery audience still studying our area from the second floor landing. “Why’d you tell *anyone*? Do you realize how very *serious* this shit is??”

“Yes, I do!” he responded angrily, though like me, he kept his harshness hushed. “But we can trust her, Pops—believe me. She’s been exposed to far more incredible things than a man who simply can’t die!”

His bottom lip quivered as he looked away. It made me want to comfort my son as Amy did right then, with her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders. Sweet, decent lady... I wondered if she saw the same little boy deep within this man who was certainly old enough to be her grandfather. (I know this must be difficult for most folks to keep straight... Me, *father* and the ancient man whose body is in the prime of life as compared to Alistair, my son, who’s just a few years away from academic retirement.)

“Can you keep it a secret?” I sought to close the wound of exposure as quickly as possible. “It literally can become a matter of life or death.”

Alistair sat up straight in his chair, and the surprised look he gave me was as if he heard this advisement for the first time.

“You know it’s the truth, son—we’ve been over this many times.” I hoped my expression was one of compassion. He nodded thoughtfully.

“You can trust me, William,” said Amy, her voice soft, sultry... and unmistakably serious. “I know you don’t know me well enough to make a completely sound judgment at this point, but I swear I will never say a word about what I’ve learned to anyone else. I’ll only speak of it to Ali, and you—should you be gracious and comfortable enough to share your experiences and wisdom with me at some point in time.”

Such flattery. Yet, the keen sense for determining the truth that I’ve developed over the years confirmed her sincerity to my heart. At least for now. Money, glory, and pleasure are three vices I’ve seen firsthand change sincere promises to bygone arrangements. Ms. Golden Eagle bore the mark of previous wealth, so that meant the only immediate dangers to alter her pledge were her vanity and whether she had any physical addictions. Not necessarily substance problems per se, it could just as easily mean a sexual or intellectual itch too deep to protect for loyalty’s sake.

“Okay...we’ll give it a whirl and see,” I told her, hoping the smile spreading across my face was more devilish than sardonic. “Our food will get cold if we let it sit much longer.”

“Once Amy shares the experience she had with a pair of angels, I think you’ll forgive my indiscretion, Pops,” said Alistair, giving me a knowing look while taking a hefty bite out of his omelet. “And her father, Dr. Stephen Golden Eagle, recorded

similar experiences—multiple angelic visitations while he translated the Tibetan text for Stanislav.”

“So, I guess the visitations had something to do with his translation work? And he was the first one to discover the papyri in question, correct?”

The whole affair was taking on a *Mothman Prophecy* sort of feel. Incidentally, *moth* men are more closely related to most angels than the majority of paranormal enthusiasts realize. Very few angelic beings are as pretty as Christmas card depictions. Some are quite frightening, and we’re not even talking about demons.

“Yes, that’s correct,” she said.

She seemed much more relieved, and yet there was some nervousness about her father’s work. I wanted to find out much more about the angelic visitations, as well as the details of the manuscript. There was much to learn from her—very useful information both for the current adventure and possibly for something down the road. But now wasn’t the time to talk about it.

“I definitely want to chat more about your father’s experiences, though not here in this place,” I said. She concurred with a subtle head nod. “Let’s finish our breakfast and do a little shopping.”

* * * * *

Amy served as our tour guide that morning in the mall, taking us to the finer stores and other sites. For a while, I believe she seriously thought my son was truly in the market for some new designer luggage. Perhaps I let that ruse go on longer than I should’ve, but it served as a little payback for Alistair’s earlier indiscretion. There’s also a small amusement park inside the Mall of the Emirates, which he wasn’t averse to visiting. Better than the prospect of donning a pair of skis and possibly running over someone. Shortly after 11:00 a.m., we began our trek back to the main entrance, and were pleasantly surprised to find that our taxi had returned early.

Unbeknownst to either my son or Amy, our three observers kept close watch as we moved through the mall—even coming within twenty feet of us at one boutique. I tried to get a better look at them just before we exited the main entrance and climbed inside the taxi. My view of them remained unclear, other than the guy with the distinctive ghutra. He looked pissed, as if they were supposed to detain us somehow or... worse.

I kept thinking about it as our taxi raced back to the airport. Based on past experiences, I pictured the trio hopping into a Mercedes and racing after our car with assault rifles pointed at us through the windows. That’s all it took for me to take further precautions. This time, I slipped the driver two Grants to get us back to the airport in a hurry.

Chapter 8

Despite the challenge of getting Alistair and Amy back onto the airplane without alarming either one, all in all I was pleased we did so without any overt confrontations. Neither one noticed the three men running after us through the

terminal as we boarded our Emirates luxury jet. I assumed in a matter of minutes we'd be back in the air, placing hundreds of miles between our pursuers and us.

But we first had to contend with a surprise guest on the aircraft. Cedric Tomlinson sat in my pod, a glass of fresh champagne in one hand and a lit slim Panatela in the other.

"William!" His contemptuous smirk belied the mellowness of his charismatic deep voice. "It's so good to see you, brother!"

I'm sure Ms. Golden Eagle was taken aback less by the presence of a complete stranger to her in our midst as she was by the man's allure. A veteran of more than twenty years with the CIA and FBI, Cedric's high cheekbones and deep brown eyes within flawless ebony skin had proven near-fatal time and time again for many debutantes in distress. At least for their hearts, I should say. Only the slight gray specks in his closely trimmed goatee gave away his age. Much like my son, Cedric had always cherished his freedom from romantic restraint, despite complications brought on by his uncommon handsomeness and infectious smile.

But different from Alistair, Cedric has always been an active player. More so than me—even in my most hedonistic moments. I recall thinking right then that all ladies present on the airplane should take notice.

"What brings you here?" My tone cheerful despite my wariness, I had a pretty good idea what had inspired his visit. It wasn't a social call that brought him to Dubai from D.C. "Did Michael decide we needed more spy-power for our 'little ole' expedition?"

"That's what I love about you, Willie boy—you've always got something smartass to say!" He laughed warmly. "And this must be Ms. Amy Golden Eagle hanging on Alistair's arm, huh?"

"I am," she acknowledged, suspiciously. "So you work for Michael?"

I guess her awareness of our government's personnel didn't extend far beyond Michael's immediate staff and contacts. Cedric's responsibilities extend into many divisions within the CIA. It made his presence on our plane both perplexing and a bit ominous.

"Let's just say he and I work together... frequently," he said, a slight smile upon his face. "Especially in situations where we're forced to handoff our *plants* moving from one location to another. We decided two nights ago that Dubai would be well suited for this particular mission."

"So, will you be joining us to learn firsthand what Mr. Stanislav is up to these days?" Alistair moved over to his pod while motioning gentlemanly for Amy to take her seat. That left only me still standing, since my seat was taken. "I don't suppose we will finally get an official itinerary with what exactly you guys want us to do... or will we?"

"Yes, you will." Cedric took a sip from his champagne and a short hit from his slim cigar. "No more mysteries, my man! No doubt ya'll have been wondering why Michael didn't contact you guys with anything other than a vague request to spy on Stanislav's operation. Right?"

Alistair and I nodded while Amy looked on with a puzzled expression on her face. This was indeed the first time she'd ever been involved with something like this. The first time working undercover for the U.S., I could tell it would take her a while to catch on to how assignments are generally handled. A little bit of info

here, followed by a few more specifics there, and so on and so on... Until all the ingredients are laid out and it's too frigging late to pull out.

"Perhaps we should excuse Amy and my dad to the lounge area while we hash this thing out." I figured that's where our stewardesses disappeared to after we boarded the plane. "Then we could break down the plan for them once we're finished."

"No, they need to be a part of this, William," advised Cedric. "Alistair's language skills will come in handy on this mission, and Amy will serve as bait to get you guys inside Stanislav's camp."

"What?? So we're actually going to be *interacting* with these people?" Now it was Alistair's turn to be taken aback. "What happened to the idea of a few photographs of Stanislav's camp captured from a safe vantage point in the Alborz Mountains? Interacting with these miscreants was not the plan William relayed from Michael, and my son is never wrong about these things!"

"On the contrary, it was *always* the plan," countered Cedric.

He stood up from his seat and moved over to the small bar near where I stood. Dressed in tan summer slacks and a short sleeve khaki shirt, he looked physically fit enough to return to an active role in the field. I wondered how much he liked his recent supervisory promotion.

"We just couldn't tell you much until now—definitely not while you were in the states." He poured himself more champagne, and then motioned to each of us if we would care to join him for a drink. Only Alistair accepted. "We're not sure how many other agencies know of your trip to Iran, but our counterparts in Britain informed us that the Russians are well aware of yours and Alistair's original flight plans. That's why we canceled your Delta reservations and provided a jet without a published boarding list. It's also the only way we could sneak Ms. Golden Eagle into Iran without 'interested parties' obtaining this information in advance."

"So, then, why are we really going to the Alborz Mountains?" I said. "It surely can't have anything to do with some bullshit myth like the Garden of Eden, right?"

Cedric nodded thoughtfully and then motioned for me to sit down in my seat. All the dividers between our pods were down, making it easy to see each other. I could feel Amy bristle as I moved past her, no doubt stung a little by my disparaging remark about her daddy's pet project.

"To be honest, yes your quest does have to do with the Garden of Eden, or at least Petr Stanislav's obsession to find it," he said, leaning back against the bar with his arms crossed. True signs that at least some of what he shared was the dead-on truth. "But Stanislav's obsession is not what we're interested in, rather it's what he's using to complete his task."

"You already know about the heavy machinery, from the satellite images—that's what Michael said," said Alistair. "Again, I don't see why we should be risking our lives with this guy. You do know he killed Amy's parents, correct?"

"Yes... and I can only imagine the level of grief she's dealing with," said Cedric. He looked over at her, and she seemed tense, as if afraid of what he might say next. "My condolences to you, Ms. Golden Eagle... Perhaps you'll see this as an opportunity to avenge what happened to your parents."

"There's no way to redeem my loss... but I do want to find my brother," she said, softly, as if the very effort to speak reopened the wounds upon her heart.

“Jeremy?”

“Yes. He’s the reason I agreed to do what Michael asked, and I intend to find him.”

Her reserved tone had just ratcheted up several notches, ignited by her seething anger. Adding that passion to the smarts she was born with could serve her well, as long as her intelligence remained in the driver’s seat.

“Hmmm... I hope you do,” said Cedric. He smiled compassionately. “Are you familiar with an acquaintance of your brother’s, a physics professor named Dr. Ethan Langford?”

“Yeah, I am... He’s one of Jeremy’s best friends.” The look she wore right then was one of surprise. More like beautiful shock... Truly, she didn’t seem to possess an ugly expression in her repertoire.

“Were you aware that the two traveled together to Iran last year?”

Man, I knew that sly grin so well. Cedric had her enticed. A few more nibbles would allow him to set his hook within her psych.

“No. No, I wasn’t,” she confessed. “Jeremy never mentioned him—not in our few phone conversations, and he didn’t talk about Ethan in his emails or letters.”

“Well, certainly you can picture the volatile combination of anthropological, geological, and physics expertise between the two of them—especially considering Ethan’s recent work in electron fusion.”

Okay, now I was all ears. Cedric wasn’t one for idle chitchat—just the productive kind. We already knew about the drilling in the mountains, belief in a real Garden of Eden, and a sick rich bastard who likes to hurt people. Now we could add in archaeological and nuclear physics expertise... Always one to up the ante, I decided to try and solve the puzzle Cedric had just begun to present.

“So, are we talking about the possibility of Stanislav kidnapping the pair to help him find the right mountain to drill in, and then finding a way to improve the drilling process by using fusion—perhaps to quicken the process?”

Alistair and Amy looked at me for a moment as if I’d just lost my damned mind. It didn’t make immediate sense to them. However, Cedric nodded approvingly while a really big smile spread across his face.

“Not bad, William... Not bad at all!” he said. He set his panatela down in a nearby ashtray so he could add a hand-clapped applause. “You’re close, brother—*real* damned close! I bet if I were to tell you that Ethan was working on a top secret device at the time of his disappearance, you’d soon figure out the rest of the picture.”

“Well, was he?”

It was just Cedric and me now. A dozen years of bouncing off each other’s thoughts meant there was no way in hell my boy and our female lawyer companion could keep pace with where the discussion suddenly veered.

“Yes, he was.” Cedric paused to retrieve his cigar and take a long drag. Perhaps this was his way to regain the upper hand again... to be the big star of this game show. “It’s only the most advanced molecular movement technology in the world. If Petr Stanislav provided the raw materials and full go ahead to develop the device—what they’re calling a *fusion generator/reconfiguration beam*—then stopping or recovering this thing is critical. It’s *absolutely* necessary.”

“Okay, so we’re talking about a beam. Like a laser, only this thing can cut easily through rock. Right?”

“The blueprints for it indicate the *FGR*—which is the current acronym chosen by the other MIT scientists working on it—not only can cut through granite, but it can also restore molecules to their original state once the incision cools.”

“That would be a wonderful thing, I’d think, for modern medicine,” said Alistair. I guess I was wrong... seems he could follow along just fine. Amy’s approving head-nod suggested it was the same for her. “But Petr Stanislav would have little use for a humanitarian application like that, I’m sure.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” said Cedric, shaking his head slightly as if amused. “He ain’t interested in *nothing* but finding his prize. Even our satellites have confirmed this, and I’ve seen disturbing images of huge chasms cut along several mountainsides. We’re talking holes that are several miles wide, which tells us that he has developed at least ten enormous FGRs that dwarf the original one created by the guys and gals at MIT. But, even worse, is the fact that after a few hours the latest images reveal the holes have disappeared. The mountainsides look just like they did before Stanislav chose to rearrange the Alborz scenery.”

“It sounds like he’s looking for the Garden of Eden and can’t find it,” I said, after connecting more of the dots presented so far. “What a great way to cover up one’s mess and keep looking anew each day. Without solid proof that he’s destroying the environment, he could go on indefinitely. It makes me wonder what this asshole is after... I doubt finding Bambi lying next to Kumba in a tranquil paradise would do much for him. What could such a man want from a garden of any kind—mystical, mythical, or not?”

“That may be an easier question to answer than it seems at first glance,” said Alistair, drawing everyone’s attention. He smiled, sheepishly. “If the guy is into ancient legends that we know are largely based on superstitions and such, it makes the most sense that he’s looking for something of that nature... only for it to be real. What was it that caused Adam and Eve to be expelled, according to legend? Wasn’t it eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life?”

Damn. Talk about an answer hitting you hard in the face like a sucker punch, though I thought the tree he referred to was better known as the Knowledge Tree of Good versus Evil.

“See, now that just shows I made the right decision in insisting Michael bring you three together for this!”

Cedric clapped his hands together again and started to say something else. But then our stewardess trio returned to the passenger cabin, with Kali walking up to him and extinguishing his cherished panatela.

“Everyone return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts,” she announced. “The pilots are ready to resume our trip to Tehran!”

She motioned for Cedric to move into the Pod behind mine. I now had to wait to find out what he meant by his last comment. He couldn’t have inferred that he actually planned our trip, since I made all arrangements for Alistair’s and my journey once I determined an elusive silver coin awaited discovery in Iran. But a nagging thought made me wonder if that was really true.

Maybe this was more underhanded than I realized. Cedric and the agency could’ve waited all this time for me to make a move... Perhaps sorting through

microfiche in the basement of the Smithsonian wasn't such a covert personal operation after all. If that were the case, then I shuddered to think that the CIA knew all along what I was studying late at night. A little nudge here and there would be enough to get me excited about Al-haroun.

It meant my search for a certain circulation of silver coins wasn't as innocently disguised as I had assumed. But unlike my intuitions about Petr Stanislav and his Holy Grail search and seizure plans, this was different. I now needed to find out how much the agency knew about my coin search. The trick, however, was how to do it without revealing in any way that I was on to them.

It wouldn't be easy, and it might even be dangerous. Perhaps more dangerous than checking up on a certain Russian lunatic looking for his own personal pot of gold... the Tree of Life.

Chapter 9

I wish I could say that I found satisfactory answers to my questions for Cedric. After all, we had a five-hour flight to Tehran. It should've meant plenty of time to catch up on old times and find out what the hell was going on behind the scenes that led to this dangerous assignment. But, he was more inclined to ingratiate himself with Amy Golden Eagle—who seemed to have the same effect on all of us. I kept waiting for her to tire of him. Yet, every time she grew weary, my son interjected life into the conversation with his own questions. Innocent queries centered on the FGR device along with other little details about our upcoming trek into the Alborz Mountains.

I say 'little' for a reason. Neither Alistair nor Amy had broached the real essential items like backpacks, food, water, and tents. Nor for that matter was there a single inquiry about the weapons we would carry for our defense against Stanislav's mercenaries. Yes, his personal bodyguards number enough to be considered a small army. How the Iranian government overlooked their presence was beyond me. All of this was important... just not enough for Cedric to share any of it. Not on the plane, anyway.

My questions for Amy were also unaddressed. It surprised me that as comfortable as she and Alistair grew in Cedric's presence, neither one mentioned the angelic visitations brought up by my son at breakfast. I would've jumped right in there for that subject, but it never came up.

Rather than fume over this, I took the time to review my notes concerning Al-haroun. If a scant opportunity presented itself, I still intended to collect my missing coin. Stanislav and the free world's fate be damned, I was getting what I came for if at all possible. Damned straight.

"You are all staying at the Ferdowsi Grand Hotel, as William had already arranged for him and Alistair," Cedric advised, as the jet began its final approach toward Khomeini International Airport. "I made sure this morning that all three of your rooms are on the same floor, and high enough to keep the local riff-raff from bothering ya'll."

“So, we’ll have a nice view, I take it?” Such an amenity seemed largely wasted on us. It would be dark soon, and from the few details I had learned about our little mission, we’d be heading into the Alborz Mountains soon after daybreak. “Are there any other perks you’ll be throwing in?”

“Just the usual.” He turned his attention to the view of the Alborz Mountains, looming just outside of Tehran’s city limits. “A good night’s rest and a gourmet breakfast, and then it’s time to get to work for ya’ll. Once we get to the hotel, I’ll fill you in with the real details.”

“Such as our mode of transportation, camping supplies, food and ammo to last for however long this reconnaissance will last?”

My unstated question exactly, and I smiled at Alistair for voicing it. He lightly stroked his chin as if missing the beard he normally sports. My son thought it might get too warm for facial hair in the arid wilderness, and yet, after the following morning neither of us would likely get an opportunity to shave until we were ready to return home.

“Yes, of course, Alistair.” Cedric chuckled for a moment. “I know you’re not the biggest fan of surprises. Let’s just say the agency has taken pains to ensure as much comfort and safety as we could squeeze into this assignment. But, each of you must also understand there are certain dangers inherent with this trip.”

“Beyond the usual dangers?” I knew that’s what he meant, but wanted him to spell it out for everyone else.

“Unfortunately, yes,” he said, returning his gaze to me. “I think it would benefit everyone if we hold off discussing further details until after we reach the hotel.”

Once the plane taxied toward the terminal, Cedric motioned for us to get our carry-on bags ready.

“We have a car waiting, across from the baggage claim, so I need ya’ll to not waste time going through the security checkpoint.”

He chuckled again as he released his seatbelt, signaling for us to follow him over to the exit door next to the cockpit.

“Aren’t you afraid of three angry Arabs who might be waiting for us to land?”

Yeah, the smartass in me rose for air once more.

“No... No, I think we’ll be all right for now,” said Cedric, studying my face. He was obviously looking for clues to tell him more about our earlier pursuers without having to ask me. “It’s Russians this time, Willie Boy. Ex-Soviet agents, the leftovers from the elite KGB assassins.”

Frankly, I liked it a helluva lot better the other way. Russian miscreants were nothing to mess with, unless one had no choice.

“Then why in the *hell* are we playing with fire here?” Alistair fumed. At the moment, he and Amy stood behind me. “If it comes to a direct confrontation with them, we’ll all be going home in body bags or caskets!”

Well, for you and Amy that would be true, son, I remember thinking to myself. As for me, it simply meant an immediate transfer from this time and place to another. Of course, in light of the fact I cherish every moment I have with my kid, this would be beyond disastrous. The likelihood of waking up naked in some other country six months from now would be a near certainty, and far too late for me to rescue him or Amy.

“That’s why it will be critical for you to listen closely to my instructions, and make sure you study your itineraries closely tonight,” said Cedric, his tone even. Smooth coolness. “Now, I’m going to ask you all to hold your questions and comments until I’ve had the chance to lay it all out for you. For now, stay focused on getting to the hotel in one piece.”

The plane stopped moving, and the instant it did, he pulled out his 9mm Beretta—Cedric’s preferred choice of weapon—and removed the clip. He handed both items to Kali, after she agreed to place them in safe keeping, until his return to the plane later that night. Then he pushed open the exit door.

Steamed air poured into the plane from outside, affirming what Pirma had advised about the current heat wave embracing Tehran. At the same time, two men wearing dark suits and sunglasses pushed a portable stairway up to the exit. I could tell they were local... Iranian, or, what is more properly referred to as Persian. This is a proud and noble people I have come to admire over the centuries, and definitely not a reflection of the popular leadership this country has known for the past one hundred years.

“Once we get through security, we’ll head downstairs and catch our ride,” said Cedric. “We’ll need to keep up with our escorts, so stay close to me.”

Without waiting for our response he moved down the stairs. Alistair and Amy scurried behind him. I followed them, catching Pirma and Kali’s nervous smiles as Serena closed the jet’s door behind us.

Our escorts nodded to Cedric and then led the way inside the terminal to our designated checkpoint. I had the distinct feeling we were being handled differently than the vast majority of travelers who visit Tehran each year. But that’s something I’ve become quite accustomed to over the years, traveling on *U.S.A. business* throughout the world. Just like my honed awareness that was on the lookout for any snipers or other threats nearby. We were open targets, but my careful scan around us didn’t reveal any menace. No Russians with a grudge just yet. That didn’t mean an expert marksman wasn’t hiding a half-mile away.

As I said, moving through checkpoints like this is now a fairly routine experience for me. However, for Alistair and Amy, they marveled at the cursory bag check and quick stamp of their passports. Such things can take hours, even without the light of suspicion cast upon any traveler in this part of the world.

From there, it took roughly fifteen minutes to get to our ride. A short limousine, beige in color, sat near an airport hotel transport. Its engine idled smoothly. Once we climbed inside, our driver and his assistant spoke briefly with Cedric. Alistair told me the conversation was in Farsi, a local dialect, and the main focus was on our safety, and the need to get us to the hotel as quickly as possible. Before my son had finished his translation, with Amy leaning close to me to hear what Alistair had to share, the limo lurched forward and then raced onto the main thoroughfare. It takes an American a moment to realize that speed and traffic etiquette are totally different overseas. In less than twenty minutes, we screeched to a halt under the veranda to the hotel’s main entrance.

“After you check in, we’ll meet in William’s room,” said Cedric, after a cautious glance over his shoulder. His uneasiness made me a bit tense, but again I didn’t see or sense anyone in our immediate surroundings to be concerned with. “I’ll wait for you all upstairs.”

He didn't need to say anything else. The look he shot me said enough. Make damned sure my kid and our sweet lawyer from the states didn't end up with bullet holes in their torsos and heads. Like I mentioned earlier, I'm experienced in taking care of 'business' like this, though I find it extremely distasteful.

The desk clerk had been expecting us, and check-in was quick and efficient. Even so, the air around us felt tense... like something catastrophic was about to happen. I made several cautionary glances around the lobby before we stepped into the elevator.

On the way upstairs to our suites on the fourth floor, Amy and Alistair gave me silent worried looks. I think the full realization that we had somehow been lured into a stinking pile of shit had arrived. For their benefit, I smiled. Truthfully, I wasn't worried about me—other than a moment's pain, danger and death are mere irritants rather than things I actually fear. But for them, this was more than unsettling. I glimpsed real terror in their expressions, which for Alistair was unusual. I think now that it was Alistair's fear for Amy's welfare. As I mentioned earlier, having a female along complicated things.

"Alistair and Amy... set your things in your rooms, and then we'll talk in William's suite."

Cedric stood outside my room with a lighted panatela. Such brazen stupidity, when he acted so cautious in regard to our wellbeing. No similar standard for himself. But then I've known this about him for years. He has the luck of a genie, or maybe he's like the proverbial cat with nine lives.

"Are you hoping for a bigger audience once that cigar sets off the smoke detector above your head?" I pointed to the standard circular model on the wall near my door. Amy's suite sat between Alistair's and mine, and she snickered while opening her door. I met Cedric's mock indignation with a devilish expression of my own. "Hold off on stoking that thing and I'll get us in here in just a moment."

"Then quit playing around and open the goddamned door, dude!" he teased.

A few moments later we were all gathered around the table near my window. Dark enough inside the room to turn the overhead light on, I kept the window sheers closed.

"Okay, make sure everyone reads over this several times tonight, so that there are no fuck ups. Am I clear?" said Cedric, after handing each of us a copy of our official itinerary for this mission. "First, we'll talk about your transportation, which is the only thing not listed on here. There's a Mercedes SUV parked in the back of this establishment, and inside it, you'll find all the outboard gear you'll need while camping in the Alborz mountains. Sam Daniels, our main Middle East contact out here, has already taken care of that. You'll find plenty of dry food, water, and Gatorade, too—enough to last a week."

"Is that how long you expect this to take?" Alistair voiced his concern almost absently, while flipping back and forth between the first and last pages. "What happens if things don't go quite the way you expect? Will the agency be ready to help out at a moment's notice?"

All great questions, my boy, and each one was borne from experience. Our Chilean disaster from two years ago came to mind the quickest.

"Not only will we be ready, but we've equipped you with satellite cell phones, radios, and three flare guns in case you need us." Cedric handed the Mercedes'

keys to me. “But we believe you should be in and out of Stanislav’s camp with the information we need within two to three days—four to five days tops. Oh, remember the cameras. You’ve got em’ in your wristwatches, and in the top button of your jackets—aside from the cell phones and the standard Nikons we’ve already packed inside the Mercedes.”

“It says here that I’m supposed to let Stanislav take me hostage, as a ruse to get me close to the FGRs?”

I think we all heard the fear and skepticism in Amy’s voice as she flipped back to the first page.

“That’s correct,” Cedric confirmed, his serious tone gaining a compassionate edge. “Now, I know this might be worrying you, given what we all know about Petr Stanislav. But, you’re going to have to trust us on this, Amy. We’ve done a ton of research on this cat, and we’re certain he will make every effort to assure your comfort while he seeks new information from you regarding your father’s research.”

She nodded slightly—a sure sign she wasn’t completely buying what he told her about her parents’ murderer.

“And you expect for these Russian assassins to look upon my feigned expertise in the same light as hers?” Alistair in no way hid his disdain.

He wasn’t buying anything at this point. Yet, I sensed he fully intended to go along with the plan. The strange power of a damsel in distress had gained the upper hand on any concerns he had for his own welfare. Or, he knows from experience that I’ll risk all life and limbs to save him.

“Yes, I do,” he said, emphatically, and then reached over and grasped Alistair’s shoulder. “You will be protected by your extensive knowledge of this area, the people, and your ability to navigate through Sanskrit.”

“There’s Sanskrit involved here?” He sounded surprised.

“Yes, there is,” Cedric confirmed. “Our sources have told us that Stanislav is having trouble finding experts who are adept at this sort of thing. Apparently, Stephen Golden Eagle’s enslavement and demise at Stanislav’s hands has infected the academic community throughout Europe against this tyrant. Since he can’t pay enough to lure someone here, he should be eager to enlist your help, Alistair.”

Now my son was the one nodding, his expression a little hopeful.

“But we’re counting on William to keep close surveillance from just outside their campsite. If ya’ll get in trouble and we need to rescue you, then he and I, and the rest of our Iran contingent will swoop in and get you and Amy out of there. We have plenty of manpower and ammo to pull it off successfully.”

“What kind of ammo will we have to work with?”

My question this time. My comrades at the CIA had better have provided enough weapons and ammunition to clear out this entire rodent nest if it came to that. A few pistols and a rifle wouldn’t cut it, in my opinion.

“Well, since I know how you are, man, I made sure there are plenty of Glocks, assault rifles, grenades, and even a rocket launcher,” he advised, shaking his head I’m sure at my love for dangerous toys. “But you won’t find them in the SUV. They are safely hidden in a little town located in the Alborz foothills.”

“What’s the place called?” I tried to picture it. This wasn’t my first trip to Tehran, as I may have mentioned before. In Alistair’s lifetime, it was my third. But

I've been here at least a dozen times during the previous nineteen centuries. "It's not Karaj or a village like Gazor Khan?"

"No. Those locales are not even close to where you'll be. This particular place doesn't even show up on a map, and the locals actually refer to it as 'a town with no name'," explained Cedric. "These people speak only the oldest Persian dialects. They are averse to all modern conveniences, including plumbing and electricity. Perhaps with a population that has never risen above two hundred souls, maybe there isn't a need."

Count me among those who strongly disagree with this thinking. Despite spending nearly two millennia without them, I'm a huge fan of 'modern conveniences'.

"And that's where I'll find our modern weaponry, huh? Did you store it all inside a burlap sack?"

This time, my question was as biting as it looks, although delivered with another shit-eating grin. It seemed like a terrible idea to stash an arsenal in a town where it would stick out like a sore thumb. Especially, since it could land the three of us in an Iranian prison for ten years.

"You're going to have to learn to trust me, too, Willie boy." Cedric snickered more in amusement than irritation. "You would think after working so long together you'd know me way better than that! The damned weaponry you're referring to is stored inside a steel carrier, which is hidden next to an ancient Persian Shrine that looks like a big granite gate. You can't miss this thing, since it's about twenty feet tall and carved into the side of a mountain just outside the village. All you've got to do is follow the map included with your itinerary, and it will lead you right to it."

"What kind of shrine is it?" Alistair had his nose buried in the map Cedric mentioned.

"We really don't know." Cedric set his empty manila folder inside his briefcase and closed it. Our little meeting had come to a close. "The local folks don't think much of it—or at least they rarely talk about it to outsiders. The area around it is badly overgrown with thick brush, and loaded with all kinds of vermin that you'll need to watch out for—"

"Vermin? What kind of vermin??"

If ever there was a deal-breaker for my son's involvement, this was it.

"Snakes—poisonous ones. Vipers."

"Vipera', you mean." Alistair moved into his most natural defensive position, dipping into his broad academic knowledge. Light beads of sweat suddenly appeared above his brow line. "That's how the natives living in and around the Alborz refer to these nasty creatures!"

"It could be worse," countered Cedric. He set the locks on his briefcase. "There are scorpions and spiders, too."

The playful glint in his eyes told me—and should have announced to my boy—that Cedric was only having fun at his expense. Unfriendly critters abound throughout the world, and hell, we encountered far worse than this down in South America.

"Dad, don't worry about it," I sought to assure Alistair. "Really, we should be more worried about panthers and bears."

I laughed and patted him on the back, which is one way I've been able to get him to relax in the past. His frown became a sheepish smile, as if he suddenly realized how silly his reaction was.

"I'm not afraid of bugs and reptiles—even the venomous ones," said Amy, grinning wryly at Alistair. "I don't mind running my hands through that stuff, as long as I've got some gloves."

"There are three pairs of light-thermal gloves already packed for you in your vehicle." Cedric took a step to the door after glancing at his wristwatch. "They are puncture proof too. Man, I hate to run, but I'm already late for a meeting at the Swiss Embassy. There are a few things left to confirm for when we head home next weekend. I'll check in with ya'll tomorrow morning at breakfast—be downstairs at 6:15 a.m. Are we cool with that arrangement?"

With his hand on the door handle, and one foot already out the door there wasn't much room for negotiation. But then he paused to look behind the dresser where the room's TV sat.

"Man, I almost forgot about this," he said, while coming back into the room and reaching behind the dresser. He pulled out a bottle of wine and handed it to me. "Sam smuggled this in here per my request. Whatever you do, don't get caught with it. When finished, pack the empty bottle with your luggage and we'll take care of getting it out of the country."

"Yet another means to earn jail time in Iran," quipped Alistair, but then his eyes grew wide when he saw the label. "*Romanée-Conti!*"

"Think of it as a gift from the good ole *U.S. of A.*," said Cedric, beaming as he watched Amy's expression soon mimic my boy's. "Far bigger rewards await for your success in this mission, and this is a nice down payment."

"Circa 1996... a burgundy like this has got to be worth, what, five to ten thousand dollars?"

Alistair took the bottle from me, gently handling it like the far more expensive artifacts we had uncovered during the past few years.

"If it went to auction... yes. But, it's only intended for the palates of three very important people. So, drink it wisely." He moved back to the door. "I've got to get out of here—Sam's probably wondering where I am. See you tomorrow at breakfast!"

"See you then, boss," I told him, speaking for us all. "Be careful out there."

"I always am." He offered one last playboy smile to Amy. Then he was gone.

"So, we're all good to go with this?"

I closed the door behind Cedric and set the security lock. I then moved back toward my window, confiscating the wine from Alistair along the way, for the time being. I intended to close the drapes entirely, but for some reason felt inclined to peer down into the hotel driveway below us. The limo idled directly below me, so it must have backed up to allow other hotel patrons to park ahead of it. Courtesy that once was common in the states, but nowadays hard to come by.

"I'm good with it," said Amy, after taking nearly another minute to review her espionage role again. She sounded more upbeat and cheerful than I expected at this point, nodding approvingly as she folded her itinerary and placed it in her purse.

“Me too, Pops,” added Alistair. He had already placed his copy inside the briefcase he brought with him into my room. “I won’t worry so much about the snakes, but I do have a concern about—”

“*What the hell was that??*”

I had already moved back to the window after hearing multiple gunshots—even before Amy finished her panicked interruption of what my boy was saying. She and Alistair joined me as I peered down below us. Immediately my heart sank. In the fading sunlight, a gray Volvo sedan sped out of the parking area, while our limo driver and his assistant ran over to a body lying nearby... face down in a growing pool of blood.

Even from upstairs I could tell who it was.

Cedric.

Chapter 10

“So, now what in the *hell* are we supposed to do?”

Alistair had fallen into his panic mode, destroying my hopes of delaying this response until later in the trip. Then again, maybe it was best to get it out and over with right then.

“Well, obviously it’s too damned dangerous to continue here.” I fought to keep my tone detached emotionally. “I’ve already made an initial inquiry into flights out of Tehran tomorrow morning. You would at least get to view the sites in Frankfurt you lamented about yesterday, and then we’ll continue back to the states on Monday.” I added a *father knows best* smile to help sell the notion.

“No... *no, we can’t* leave yet!” Amy protested. At the moment, we sat around the small table in my room. Alistair and Amy had waited there for my return, nursing their mutual misgivings in my absence. “You’ve got to understand, William, that I’m *not* leaving without my brother!”

“Do you really need further proof that we aren’t welcome here, in dear old Iran?” I was growing more and more irritated. We had already been over the ‘why we need to leave’ portion of our discussion twice already. “You must have a serious death wish, little lady, and sure as shit these bastards will step up their assaults the longer we linger around here! I can’t think of a more effective *Keep out!* sign than a bullet riddled body left at your doorstep—especially a body as U.S.A. medal honored as was Cedric Tomlinson!”

Yeah, I was getting seriously pissed. I must admit that I don’t do so well with bullheaded females.

“But, Cedric’s not dead, Pops,” Alistair corrected me. “You said so yourself, that he’s in serious condition after surgery. Is he really going to be all right, or was that a load of bullshit you served up fifteen minutes ago?”

Yes, it was the truth. Somehow—miraculously—the nine bullets that hit his torso missed Cedric’s heart, liver, and any other immediately vital organs. Two hit his stomach, and three other bullets pierced his lungs. That alone could’ve killed him—*would’ve* killed anyone less ornery than Cedric Elijah Tomlinson the Third.

But the man is one stubborn SOB... It makes me wonder what he'd be like if he ever were to become immortal in the flesh.

Of course, some credit needs to go to the ambulance service and the paramedics, nurses, and the surgeon who wasted little time in getting the bleeding stopped and the bullets removed. And all at the fraction of what it would cost in America if he'd been gunned down in the streets of D.C.

"Yes, he is going to be okay... that's the current prognosis." I pictured what Agent Sam Daniels told me less than a half hour earlier. I decided right then to take a more relaxed posture, since I was getting nowhere with these two by using a heavy-handed approach. "The assassins might still return for him, and I'll bet our presence anywhere near Tehran or Stanislav's operation in the Alborz will weigh heavily in that score."

Alistair nodded slowly as if trying to digest my point of view.

"Then maybe you two should go back to the states!" huffed Amy.

She leaned back in her chair with her arms folded severely across her chest. Her face was flushed, and her lips became a thin line. She didn't need to do anything else to tell me that she'd just become a thousand pound dead weight. Amy wasn't budging on her conviction to stay in Iran.

"We're not going anywhere without you. And, despite what you might be scheming to do, you're not going anywhere without Alistair and me. Period."

I'm sure the scowl on my face did little to enhance my allure to her, but she left me little choice. Even if I couldn't nudge her to consider abandoning our proposed mission, I'd damned sure do everything in my power to make sure she stayed put in this hotel.

"I'm... *not*... leaving Iran!"

We were losing precious time sitting there, and due to the fact another death squad could be sent to finish the job started by the dudes in the gray Volvo I moved to end our little disagreement and get my kid and our princess on to more important things.

"Okay," I told her, pulling back my hands in surrender. "You win for now. I suggest we chill for now in our rooms, and I'll treat us all to a steak dinner in my suite within the hour. Let's not decide on anything else until we've had a full night's rest and a lot more time to consider all of our options. I promise that I won't put any pressure on you one way or another... at least for tonight. How does that sound?"

Silence... but at least she nodded, though sullenly. I figured any acknowledgement beyond compliance was a victory at this point.

"How about you, son?"

"I can wait until the morning." He glanced over at her. She offered him a weak smile and a more emphatic head nod, to which he sheepishly grinned.

"Then I guess that settles things for now," I said, rising from the table. They both seemed hesitant to follow my lead. It didn't matter. I'd already made up my mind to wait as long as it took to get them to agree with me.

Even if it took all night.

* * * * *

“Then you agree with me on this... yes?” I said, firmly, into the landline handset in my room.

Michael Lavoie was on the other end of the line, and for the past hour, we had filled in missing details for each other. He had the latest on Cedric’s steady improvement as well as confirmation that the Russians undoubtedly sponsored the hit. Me? I relayed the news that my kid and our suddenly surly female companion seemed bent on following through with Plan A.

9:05 p.m. Nighttime in Tehran.

“Well?” I persisted, when the only immediate response was a low sigh on the other end.

“I can see your point, William,” he said, with a touch of angst in his tone. “But I also see Amy’s perspective, as well. I’ve known this kid for years, man. When she gets an idea stuck in her head it’s harder than hell to get her to compromise. Even if I grant you the approval to get her out of there forcibly, you’ll still have a helluva time getting her to comply.”

“You know as well as me that she and my dad can’t stay here—it’s too damned dangerous!” I was finding it hard to hide my misgivings about this whole affair. “If you need me to stay behind and get the details on the FGRs Stanislav is using, I’m more than willing to do it. But please leave them out of this!”

“I can’t do that!” His anxiety ratcheted up a few more notches. “If they’re not continuing the mission, then neither can you!”

“*Shit!*” I was becoming more and more convinced that silver coin number twenty-two would have to wait for some other trip to Iran... a trip that could very well get hijacked as this one had.

“Why don’t you follow your commitment to Ms. Amy and Alistair, William and just sleep on it?” he suggested. “Who knows, you might see things differently in the morning. If nothing else, you’ll know for sure how to handle this by then.”

After Michael hung up, I thought about my parting words with both my boy and Ms. Golden Eagle. We had just finished our dinner, and one last glass of Cedric’s expensive wine. “Don’t let worry or desperation make your decision for you—make it from that most peaceful place within your hearts,” I told them. “Share it with me first thing in the morning and we’ll go from there.”

Maybe it was the liquor talking after we polished off the bottle. Yet, I felt encouraged when Alistair and Amy wavered in their previous stance to ignore me. They both smiled and told me that they would indeed sleep on it all. No anger or hard feelings, just a quick promise they wouldn’t keep me hanging the next day with their decision.

If only it was true.

Chapter 11

I got out of bed at 3:40 a.m. and waited. *Listening* and waiting, I should say, on high alert for any door noises and footfalls moving down the hallway outside my room. After nearly half an hour passed in silence, I crept over to my window and peered down into the main parking area below. Other than a few noisy patrons

arguing under the gazebo near the main entrance, I didn't detect anything or anyone of note.

No persons of interest. No Alistair Barrow or Amy Golden Eagle.

Yes, I fully expected them to pull some shenanigans after the previous evening's standoff. Although my boy would normally accept my point of view after I explained the basis for my position, Amy's charms had thrown a wildcard onto the playing field. Alistair was bedeviled more than I had ever seen before, which changed the rules on what I could reasonably expect. At least as far as what I could expect to happen with his normally methodical and pragmatic approach to everything.

Ms. Golden Eagle had turned my son into a demure pup, whose strong independent traits had steadily eroded since making her acquaintance Friday morning. In other words, even though he spoke as if he were the same old Ali, his actions made him seem more like a love-starved teenager with a terrible crush on a sexy high school teacher—even though, in this case, he's twice as old as she.

Considering this observation after they returned to their rooms Saturday night, I resolved to keep a tireless vigil until dawn. Just in case the pair tried to sneak out of the hotel and travel into the Alborz Mountains without me.

Damned straight it wasn't gonna happen... But, damn, it *did* happen.

Damned burgundy, from one of the finest French vineyards! And, damned *me* for being so arrogant to think I could easily outsmart them both!

But it started with the wine... potent enough to prevent me from keeping track of how many glasses I had. It doesn't take much to intoxicate me. The impairment that followed was more than I bargained for—at least in terms of what it did to my ability to stay awake.

Yes, please join me in saying, "Oh shit!"

Seriously, I must've fell asleep around midnight, and then slept like a baby until my alarm resounded for the third time.

Looking back now, they must have slipped out of the hotel well before three o'clock. In terms of being on top of their whereabouts and movements, I never had a chance. Yet, there I was at 4:00 a.m. still listening to the gradual awakening of the Ferdowski around me, waiting for either Amy or Alistair to try and tiptoe past my room to the elevators. Meanwhile, they were already on the main mountain highway approaching the unnamed small village Cedric told us about Saturday evening.

I never considered they would behave so foolishly, setting out in desperation to try and locate Jeremy Golden Eagle. At least he should be flattered that his little sis was willing to go out on a precarious limb for him. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Thank God I didn't wait any longer than 4:30 a.m. to venture outside my room, or the result of my impaired common sense could've been much worse. My intent was to move quietly to Amy's suite and then on to Alistair's room, hoping to confirm the pair still slept. But as soon as I stepped outside my room, something fell upon my right shoulder and tumbled onto the floor. For a moment, I stared stupidly at the Ferdowski stationery envelope and heavy script favored by my son.

Alistair's signature.

What the...?

Clever boy, placing the sealed correspondence above my door, delicately perched to fall once I ventured from my suite. He knows I rarely sleep and can awaken at the slightest sound... everything from a quiet whisper to an infant housefly buzzing fifty feet away from my bed.

Sliding a note under my door would've earned him and Amy all of thirty seconds as a head start, instead of the near two-hour lead they presently had. I already knew what the note inside the envelope said. No need to look at it, but I did so anyway.

Sorry, Pops. We left without you, since it's obvious to both Amy and me that you will do everything in your power to prevent us from doing what needs to be done. No offense intended, and I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive us. Please don't try to follow us, Pops...we hope to see you within a week. All you'll do by coming after us is royally screw this up, and possibly get Amy and me killed. Love, Ali."

"Screw this up?!" I hissed angrily while reading the note again. For the moment, the hallway sat deserted. "Ali, you have no idea what you're doing... no earthly clue what you've already done!"

Fighting the urge to panic while my mind raced, I stashed the envelope inside my jeans pocket. I had already showered and dressed appropriately for the day, thinking I had plenty of time to do so. That was before I ventured from my room.

But the letter changed everything. I ran back inside my room and grabbed the basic things I might need, including my loaded briefcase, laptop, and cell phone. The keys to the Mercedes were missing—probably lifted by either Amy or Alistair last night, though I should've noticed this when I set my wallet on my room's dresser just before I retired.

Shit!

Since I didn't have a clue at the moment as to how this latest debacle would shake out, I went ahead and arranged storage for my luggage with the front desk. I slipped another fifty dollar bill to the desk clerk to make sure my single suitcase would be waiting for me whenever I returned. Then I hailed a taxi to the nearest rent-a-car establishment, pleasantly surprised to find one open before 5:00 a.m. I doled out two additional Grants to make sure the necessary paperwork got done without any *foreigner* delays. With my chances of catching up to Alistair and Amy dwindling by the minute, I could ill-afford getting caught in standstill traffic at the onset of Fajr.

Fortunately, there were no more delays to deal with. Other than some congestion near Imam Khomeini Square, it soon became just me and a fairly deserted highway on my way into the Alborz. I must admit to a moment of nostalgia, thinking back to 1979 and the power of the Ayatollah upon the Iranian masses. That was the last time I was here on government business, or at least the last time I did something in Persia for my American overseers.

Silver coin number twelve was the prize for me back then, and that one had been buried deep in the earth, beneath the rubble of a collapsed castle in the Alamoot Valley. Passing through downtown in Tehran back then especially affected me... so many armed soldiers with permission to use 'necessary force' to

control the masses calling for a Jihad to overthrow the imperialistic powers in the West—namely the United States.

For some reason, the common anger and demand for nationalistic rebellion inspired by Iran's most powerful religious leader reminded me of when another charismatic *teacher* commanded so much fervor. But that was almost two thousand years ago, when Jesus of Nazareth gave his Sermon on the Mount. Most depictions of that event are far from accurate, especially the ones featuring hillsides filled with the expectant faces of peaceful shepherds, farmers, and the general citizenry of Judea.

It wasn't so. Many in attendance were restless and hungry for violence that day, despite the optimum conditions, comfortable temperatures, and a sunny sky with very few clouds. Like a nice big company picnic for disgruntled postal workers nowadays, except back then the place was crawling with Roman legions on orders to squash any signs of an uprising by *necessary force*. There were enough on hand to herd everyone in attendance into the Sea of Galilee nearby.

That was the first time for me that I witnessed the incredible power of Jesus the speaker, whose soothing voice and words calmed the mass of humanity around him. Even the scowling Roman soldiers became serene. Of course, back then I still thought of Jesus as an incredible teacher and perhaps a prophet, though nothing more.

But back to the present. The sun rising above the Alborz range was an incredible sight—just as spectacular as the sunsets and sunrises I've witnessed when traveling along the Rockies in either American continent. The Alborz sunrise made me hopeful that I might catch up to my ornery kid and the young lady who inspired his infatuation. That hope lasted for the better part of the morning, especially once I came upon the rutted dirt road that led to the ancient village Cedric told us about the night before.

The village was as primitive as advertised, and far more austere than anything I can remember ever seeing in this country during the last several hundred years. In fact, in some ways it reminded me of my early journeys across Asia and Africa in the first two centuries A.D. Lots of chickens, sheep, and goats wandering through dirt streets. The houses, mosque, and other buildings were rudimentary, and a pair of ancient wells sat on either side of the mosque.

The men and women were clothed in traditional robes, with the women's faces covered. Like stereotypes living in an oppressed Middle Eastern land. That is, except for one key difference: these villagers all carried the gleam of joy in their expressions. I got out of my rental to investigate the area, and to confirm the Mercedes I sought and its passengers had come by there earlier that morning. Every one of these people greeted me with kindness.

I was leery of conversing in the newer Persian dialects, but fortunately deciphered enough of what they said. They also understood some of the Arabic terms I gave them. But none could speak or understand English.

Alistair and Amy had indeed made it this far, and the chief of this small populace led me to the northern edge of the village, where a large granite gate had been carved into a mountainside. The artisanship much more refined than anything else in the area, this had to be the hiding place for the cache of weapons

Cedric had advised us about. It was just a matter of digging around the thick bushes and overgrown weeds surrounding the gate to find some serious weaponry.

Having tissues that regenerate quickly has so many advantages. Neurotoxins are virtually harmless to me, unless I suppose someone forced several gallons of the stuff down my throat at one time. The only thing for me to worry about was a momentary sting from a threatened insect or the vipers the area is famous for. A small scorpion stung me twice while I dug around the dirt until I located the steel crate carrying the small arsenal promised by Cedric. By the time I brought the crate out to where I could clearly see its contents, the twin wounds from the little monster had disappeared, and complete healing was just moments away.

The guns, grenades, and rocket launcher were all intact, which heightened my worry for my missing companions' welfare.

Nearby tire tracks in the sandy dirt confirmed the presence of a recent visitor that morning. If it was Amy and Alistair, I wondered why they bothered to drive here through the rutted terrain, and yet leave the weapons untouched. Perhaps it had something to do with the vermin in greater abundance than Cedric had warned us about. I know for a fact my boy wouldn't come within five feet of a verifiable lair of such critters.

Increasingly worried about their well-being, I hurriedly stashed most of the weapons inside the trunk of my rented Volvo. When everything was loaded up, I confirmed the direction where the Mercedes was headed and continued my pursuit of Amy and Alistair.

The road's terrain became more and more eroded, and I almost slid off into a deep ravine as I followed the ancient trail deeper into the mountains. Just to make sure I remained on the right path, I stopped the car several times to check the tire tracks in front of me. Soon, I came across other tracks that made me nervous... tracks from several vehicles, and one with unusually large tire tracks.

Stanislav's camp must be somewhere close by. That thought alone quickened my pulse.

I need to get to them before he strikes first!

I slowed the car and rolled down the windows, so I could listen. At first, it was an instinctive response. Maybe it had something to do with the road's winding course that steadily carried me to higher and higher elevations, with a drop-off of several hundred feet on one side of the road. That would make most folks nervous, I'm sure.

But that wasn't it. It was the feeling I had just entered the lair of some deadly predator...like a mayfly drifting into a spider's web.

Then I heard it. The sound of thunder moving through the earth. Not quite a quake, but certainly a disruption within the earth's crust.

Ah, shit! ... Make that double-damn-it shit!!

The proximity of the sound announced it couldn't be further than a mile or two ahead of me... perhaps on the other side of the next bend.

I looked for the closest cluster of thick evergreens to ditch the Volvo, and cut the engine as I coasted in behind a large boulder. Yeah, this was a tough decision, since my fatherly urges told me to drive on further like the proverbial bull in a china shop and recklessly deal with whatever menace I found there. Just as long as I retrieved my two stray pups. Right?

Yes, and get us all killed in the process—me temporarily, and Amy and Alistair permanently. So I had to be smart, and patient, using careful precise planning.

Arming myself with a Glock, machete, and a Bushmaster ACR—my weapons of choice—I set out on foot while I plotted my course of action. From the sound of things, I would certainly encounter someone working for Petr Stanislav within the next fifteen to twenty minutes, whether that was his mercenaries on patrol, his scientists using their FGRs to dismantle a mountainside, or the Russians' actual *home away from home*. Any of the three would do, though I doubted I'd actually find the Soviet camp this close to the fusion *blasting zone*.

I jogged quietly around the bend, while hearing and feeling another rumble through the ground beneath my feet. I also heard truck sounds in the distance that were getting closer. Bracing myself for the sound of human voices, I searched the hilltops for lookouts or snipers.

While scanning the areas above me, I damned near missed seeing a smoldering vehicle just ahead of me, sitting in the middle of the road and right before the next bend. Impossible to tell what make or model it was, I could tell the automobile had been fairly new. Silver paint along the back panel had escaped the intense heat and flames, which consumed the rest of the vehicle body.

My heart raced.

All evidence said the vehicle had once been a car of choice. One that fit certain specifications—*my* specs—for what I liked to travel in when serving my country overseas. When I reached the burning wreckage, the circular hood ornament was still intact, though blackened from the fire that probably died over an hour before.

The car looked as if a grenade, or more likely, a launched missile from a mercenary's shoulder had destroyed it. Survivors were unlikely.

The Mercedes that had transported my precious son and the girl whose charms he couldn't resist was now a burning mass of metal, glass, and toxic fumes from melted upholstery.

There was no chance for survivors... no chance for either of them.

Chapter 12

I wasn't sure what to do next. Normally, that's not an issue for me... But, presented with the likelihood that my son was dead nearly paralyzed my mind. My initial thoughts muddled, the only thing I could discern was an urgent need to check the vehicle for bone fragments—praying to God Almighty I didn't find any. The intense heat had destroyed all other evidence of Alistair's and Amy's presence. Shielding my eyes from the early afternoon sunlight, I peered into where the front seats once were. Smoldering gray ashes sat in twin piles. Were they made up of charred human remains or merely the stuffing from a pair of bucket seats?

I dug my hands into the closest pile, where glowing embers burned away the outer flesh from my fingers. Gruesome, I know, but even before I had fully withdrawn them from the vehicle's marred interior, my hands had almost finished their healing. The searing pain nearly gone, all that needed to reappear were the fingernails and soft hair across the backs of my knuckles. An amazing

transformation, I'm sure, but one that brought only meager solace. No bone fragments negated the likelihood that Amy and Alistair were present in the vehicle when it was attacked. That could be good news. However, the absence of physical evidence didn't prove they survived either.

It certainly changed my game plan, though, since as long as there was a chance they survived this attack there was also a shot for me to rescue them. But I'd have to be extremely careful in my approach. If these were the same Soviets I had crossed paths with in the past, they were a ruthless bunch. I sent a silent, fervent prayer heavenward that my boy would pull off his ruse as an archaeologist well, and buy me enough time to find him and Amy. As for Ms. Golden Eagle, I knew her thirst for answers and a deep desire for revenge would sustain her far longer than Alistair.

It became more difficult to avoid detection as I moved past the Soviet engineering team currently boring holes into the earth's crust with their fusion devices. I tried to keep hidden from anyone's direct view, but it was damned near impossible once the evergreen trees disappeared. At least it afforded me a better view of Stanislav's operation.

After climbing up a hillside, I crouched behind a pair of large boulders. Forcing myself to use every precaution and keep my slight movements deliberate, I finally gained the vantage point I desired.

Gigantic trucks, with wheels significantly taller than any man in the area were parked in front of the mountainside. Equally enormous guns set atop each truck—at least that's what they initially looked like. Yet, when a thick stream of intense blue light emanated from the truck closest to me, I immediately recognized that thing on top of it was the so called 'fusion generator/reconfiguration beam'. But these FGRs were several hundred times bigger than the test versions I envisioned from Cedric's description.

The mountainside shook furiously, knocking me to the ground. But not before I witnessed part of the rock surface closest to me suddenly disappear into a massive indentation forming within the mountain. Incredible enough, what happened next was even more so.

Suddenly, the mountain opened up. The earth's crust melted away as if sucked into some invisible vacuum, leaving deep passageways exposed. Like the broken geodes Alistair collected as a kid in Scotland, the crystallized veins of gem material ranging from amethyst to lighter versions of quartz and perhaps much more valuable minerals glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

The loosened ground under my feet began to give way, forcing me to cling to the base of the boulder I had hid behind. I pulled myself back up, praying that my presence remained undetected. Meanwhile, a team of men and women dressed in khaki jumpsuits and hardhats approached the wound in the earth, carrying rifle-sized electronic sensors directed toward the chasm just created. I wasn't close enough to fully perceive the design of these sensors, but the group—whom I determined must all be employed by Petr Stanislav—shook their heads wearily. Despite being an enormous windfall for the unscrupulous Russians, it wasn't what they sought. They were looking for something else of value that wasn't there.

Were they, in fact, searching for the Garden of Eden?

“No frigging way,” I whispered to myself, shaking my head at the idea’s absurdity.

It seemed even more ludicrous than it had before. I’m not sure why this would be any harder for me to accept than my own fate of walking the earth forever. One reality is hardly sillier than the other. Right? Besides, if a nut like Petr Stanislav believed the place existed, then everyone working for him should be on the same page. It certainly made me consider how many others shared the bottom of the Baltic Sea with Amy Golden Eagle’s parents.

With the clock ticking on my kid’s survival chances, I moved to my hideout’s other side. The ground was more stable, and the view conducive to what I needed. I could see the Russian’s camp, less than half a mile away. Tall, slender junipers grew along a shallow stream, with rows of white tents lined along either side of the stream. Just beyond the tents sat a cluster of trailers arranged in a circle—the likely home base for this operation.

What I wouldn’t have given right then for a pair of binoculars. Sunglasses too. I didn’t recall seeing either important item listed with our itinerary the night before. With all of the excitement going on, I completely forgot about what was missing from the list. I should’ve stopped and purchased both items on my way out of Tehran that morning. At the time, I was in a frantic rush to catch my two problem children before something terrible happened—like their automobile being destroyed by a launched rocket.

While thinking about this, I noticed a number of mercenary soldiers crawling around the perimeter below my observation point. Suddenly several of them pointed to my hideout, though I was careful to remain out of their line of sight. Something else had tipped them to my presence.

I needed to find a new hideout, and quickly. But before I could even start looking for a new location, a sharp shooting pain erupted from the base of my neck. It was too late to run... too late to do anything.

By the time I turned around to see what had hit me, I had already begun to black out. Black military boots and the butt from an AN-94 rifle were the last things I saw.

Chapter 13

When I regained consciousness I couldn’t move. Rope-bound to a wooden chair, my arms and hands were pulled tightly behind me. Only my head, lower legs, and my feet were free. Obviously, someone intended for me to stay put when I came to. Feeling disoriented, my head throbbed like a mother. I tried to recall the unclear events that had brought me to this point.

Something about a dangerous secret mission, a burned-out car, and the Garden of Eden. That last part seemed to energize my recovery, and as the fog cleared from my mind I steadily remembered everything.

“So, William Barrow, we meet again,” said a middle-aged man from behind me.

The voice was mellow and yet at the same time ice cold. Like fine German ale kept in a freezer... undrinkable. Likewise, I pictured the owner of the voice to be

just as disagreeable. But the man wasn't German, the accent was too thick... Russian. And the familiarity was profound... both with this asshole knowing my name and my own recognizance of his unsavory persona.

"Viktor?" I said, weakly. My mouth and throat felt as dry as sandpaper, like I hadn't drunk anything for several days. "Where in the hell am I?"

"How easily you remember me, William." The man's mellowness gave way to a frigid influx of disdain. He stepped around me and moved over to where a group of five other men and a woman stood near the door, his boot heels clicking softly upon the linoleum covered floor. "It appears I might not have wasted my time waiting for you to wake up these past two days."

Huh?

Once he moved past me, I fully confirmed it was Viktor. Viktor Kaslow, ex Lieutenant Colonel in the Soviet Union's army from twenty-five years ago, and captain for one of Moscow's most feared KGB death squads even after the Cold War ended. This man was among the Soviet's most feared assassins, garnering that reputation based upon his supreme passion for his vocation.

"You are in some trouble, my friend. We caught you and your father, Alistair, trespassing. As well as the archaeologist's daughter. But have no worries, William. After you and my subordinates get acquainted, all three of you shall exit this world promptly and join your less fortunate CIA predecessors in the afterlife."

They—the Russians—had awaited my arrival. Viktor's words alone confirmed that, but also a quick glance around the room affirmed the same conclusion. This had to be one of the trailers I spotted from my higher vantage point earlier. A double-wide large enough to fit several oversized pieces of furniture, including a large mahogany desk that sat close to the only door in the room. Both windows—each on opposite walls—were covered with thick draperies, making it impossible to tell whether it was morning or night.

Other furniture included a long table that sat next to a suspended fireplace. Despite the oppressive heat outside and an inefficient air conditioner wall unit, small flames danced within the hearth. A row of shiny sharp cutlery, specially designed for either surgery or torture, was laid out upon a blood-spotted white sheet that haphazardly covered the table.

Oh joy! ... Such fun and games to look forward to!

"I take it that a plea of neutrality—that neither you nor we own the land we're squatting upon will make a difference?" I countered, my tone upbeat despite my growing unease.

For the other men and the woman eyeing me coldly, I'm sure they found the smirk on my face especially annoying. But then, none of them had ever witnessed the Amazing Willie Boy Barrow regenerating lost digits from fingers, toes, and genitalia. Such antics have brought several prominent members of the Spanish Inquisition to their knees in past centuries. It could very well be where the whole *Father of Vampires* legend originated from. Either that, or maybe witnessing a lopped off arm or hand reappear after the initial blood geyser was what gave birth to the happy horseshit about being the very first *real* blood drinker.

Viktor had never witnessed that side of me, though. Not even when he gashed me pretty good back in 1993, when we squared off in Algeria.

Thinking about this infused my smirk, until I noticed my son and Amy Golden Eagle bound similar to me. Secured to wooden chairs pushed against the wall to my right, both looked haggard and sported red welts upon their faces and arms. Their clothes were soiled from dirt and sweat, and Amy's blouse had been torn open. I couldn't tell if that was a sign of sexual assault, or if it was an initial threat to slice open a sensitive region of her body to gain proprietary info concerning her CIA contacts and such. The lack of blood on her blouse negated the latter notion, at least for now, though I did see a few red lines just below her chin that indicated knife cuts. From the array of deadly toys laid out on the nearby table, I could tell it wouldn't be long before a full menu of entrées like that were served up for me.

It added credibility to the premise I'd actually been out of commission the past three days. I noticed then that Alistair bore more bruises than Amy, and I was greatly alarmed by the angry red ring around his neck. Obvious ligature marks, he looked at me with pleading eyes. It broke my heart to see him like this, and I silently lamented that I allowed us to get suckered into this assignment. Despite the terrible torture and discomfort he had already endured, I could tell he was fighting to hold his even-keeled disposition together. Probably the same thing was true for Amy, whose shivering body revealed the dire distress she hid admirably beneath her defiant countenance.

Yet, I doubt she even understood how little the Russian agents in the room cared about hers or Alistair's courage one way or another.

"No, you *only* are the squatters, as we have already made legitimate claims with the Iranian government," said Viktor, stepping back toward me from the others.

Time had been kind to the former chief adversary for the KGB. Although more than a dozen years had passed since we last faced off, he still carried the same virile air. His slicked back blonde hair bore just a slight hint of gray along the temples, and his steel blue eyes gleamed with the same malice I remembered. If not for the chiseled bone structure in his face that had held up remarkably well since our last encounter, there would be no hiding the monster that lurked within.

"If the Iranian people knew what you guys were up to, I doubt your claims would remain legitimate for long." I hoped my bravado and intense dislike of this man didn't translate to a quick demise for the two kids under my care and supervision. "That's the problem with you and any other Soviet—once an arrogant jackass, then always an arrogant jackass."

Yes, I was definitely stoking the fire here—which might seem in direct contradiction to what I just advised about my concern about our future. Yet, two members of this group—the youngest male and the lone female—had just moved over to the table and picked up a pair of branding irons and placed them into the burning hearth. I didn't have to look over at Alistair and Amy to know they were terrified... I felt their rising panic as it radiated toward me. Being 'contraire' was the only thing I could think of to buy us more time... more time to think up a better plan.

"You are quite *incorrect!*" said a booming voice from behind me. "I would say that being an *arrogant jackass* is an American trait—an *exclusive* American quality!"

I couldn't turn my head far enough to see who it was, but a moment later an immense human being appeared beside my chair. Petr Stanislav's hulking frame

loomed above me. Even uglier than the photograph Michael Lavoie had shown to me, his image must have been retouched. Or, more than likely, there was a much greater distance between his hideous mug and the camera lens when the picture was taken as compared to my unfortunate eyes right then. Not even the Amosu beige casual suit he wore could save him.

He bent down toward me, his big bushy head of reddish blonde hair encroaching into my personal space. His breath smelled like a sour outhouse, and the joyless mirth in his eyes told me that he greatly relished my discomfort by his presence. The antitheses to Viktor's deadly charms, though both were venomous vipers at heart.

"Why else would you so foolishly come here?" he continued. "You, who are supposed to be such a great American spy, and yet failed miserably in carrying out a simple surveillance... Not to mention your CIA's inept plan for your father, Alistair, and Stephen Golden Eagle's daughter to infiltrate our operation. You are *all* arrogant jackasses!"

His deep voice rumbled with delight. I guess it didn't take much to amuse this abhorrent giant. At least that was my initial impression, until he grew serious, eyeing me with ever-deepening contempt.

"Well, then, humor me big guy." I leaned away from him to avoid the halitosis fumes. "What else could we have done, since you've done a poor job of keeping things secret? Very soon, the entire free world will know what you and your buddies have been up to around here!"

Not a guarantee, but chances of our Russian captors keeping satellite images secret were becoming increasingly difficult. One good network hacker is all it would take, and then the outer space images of a mountainside disappearing on earth could go viral on the internet in under a day.

The surprised look I received from Petr Stanislav confirmed my assertion's accuracy.

"You could have simply cancelled, and not come out here!" Sneering, he turned away and moved over to the table, where he picked up a long serrated knife. "I would gladly tell you more about what all of this means for our future—the improved lot of my Soviet brethren as well as the overdue demise for your American government—but I have already grown weary of your presence!"

He chuckled as he returned his gaze to me, and this time the heavy soulless timber from his throat sent an icy chill up and down my spine.

At first I had nothing more to say... no more clever replies. But then I thought about the brethren he referred to—the peaceful Russian populace who are as kind and noble as any other people I've ever encountered. Except for their KGB faction.

"Okay, lay it on me, then," I said brazenly. "I'd love to hear the tale of how what you're doing here in Iran will actually benefit your Russian brothers and sisters."

He glared in response, but that was it. Stanislav had already made up his mind. With no appeals left, it was time for a miracle. Viktor's added snicker further heightened my dread.

"I have run out of patience with you. So, we shall leave your fate to Vera and Nicholas." Stanislav moved past me and motioned for the rest of his team to follow him out of the building. The two assistants he referred to grabbed a fiery branding iron apiece and approached me from either side. "Have fun Mr. Barrow. The rest of

your life is now in the hands of my most ruthless subordinates. That should give you something to think about while they sear the very flesh from your bones!”

“Bye-bye, William!” crooned Viktor, his tone rapturous. Honestly, I expected a little more respect from him, but I guess some wounds from long ago were still fresh. “Maybe we’ll meet again, eh? Perhaps eventually in the afterlife?”

Not if I can help it, you sorry sack of shit!

It was the last calm thought I had before Vera and Nicolas reached my chair.

Chapter 14

I tried to think of someplace happy... someplace heavenly. Or, at least a place I was familiar with... a place where unspoiled innocence ruled my days and nights. That usually did the trick for me. It had ever since I was a young boy, growing up in Judea.

Sometimes, the image of my mother’s face would come to me, so warm and so sweet. A natural beauty that was taken from this life when I was still a boy. My father’s bitterness, from losing the only thing he ever loved, was often felt in the blows he’d deliver to my brother and me. I believe that’s where my skepticism about the innate goodness of God Almighty was born. Even now—despite living the miracle that is my existence—I have my moments when I can’t see His providence... His eternal goodness.

“This is going to hurt—I won’t lie about that,” said Nicholas, his English nearly buried in his Ukrainian accent as he brought the heated brand up to my face. I could feel the fiery heat as the inflamed tip hovered just below my right eye. “I want to hear you scream!”

Hear you squeam? I mused silently. But it was hard to ignore the sharp malice in the tone. These assholes were all the same. Even the girl named Vera wore a sadistic sneer that made her otherwise comely features look especially ugly. Truth be told, these two dark haired miscreants with pale gray eyes reminded me of a recent cartoon version of Hansel and Gretel, hunched over with their red-hot prods held out in front of them like defensive weapons. It was as if they fully expected their dangerous captive to escape his bonds and tear their frigging crazy expressions clean off their faces.

Not quite the way it went down, but I did have a few tricks up my sleeve. Why they left my feet unfettered remains a mystery to me. Maybe because, in most cases, a captive wouldn’t be thinking of ways to use their lower extremities to compensate for the lack of use of one’s upper body.

It’s for times like these that two thousand years of experience comes in handy. That, and the fact unless they scored a direct hit on a vital organ, I would recover, and quickly. More like immediately. Therefore, threats of burning holes in my face or searing my eyeballs out of my head didn’t have quite the same effect it would have on most folks.

Just as the brand touched my skin, sending terrible pain into thousands of nerve endings on my face, I entangled Nicholas’s legs with mine and drew him closer. The brand’s fiery tip gouged into my face as layers of skin fell away. I could

hear Amy shrieking in the background, along with my boy's anguished cries for my assailants to take him instead.

Like I'd ever let that happen.

But I had a plan. Holding my breath in order to minimize the excruciating agony inflicted upon the right side of my face, I stood up with the heavy chair attached to me. I may not look like Superman, but years of strength training and 'mind over matter' exercises made this easier than some might think. Definitely easier than Nicholas or Vera did, I'm sure.

Nicholas let out a surprised gasp as he stumbled into Vera and then landed on his back upon the floor. I moved in quickly and swung the weight of the chair into her arm holding her brand. It flew out and landed on Nicholas's chest.

Here's where it could've all gone disastrously for me, and I knew I only had a few seconds to overtake them. I couldn't do anything immediately about the shrill screams he let out as the fiery brand ignited his shirt, but before he could stand up I swung around once more, throwing my weight fully into the movement. Thankfully I didn't lose my balance and Vera was too stunned to step out of the way. I hit her full on, and she landed on her blazing cohort.

She was too surprised to let out anything more than a yelp. I had to finish the job on them before the pair raised enough holy hell for Viktor, Petr, and the rest of the gang to realize it wasn't William Barrow screaming inside this building. Again, the fact the fire quickly spread from him to her wasn't a deterrent for me. It couldn't be. I couldn't let that possibility exist, despite the incredible pain I endured after my right cheek was destroyed. Charred flaps of skin and gum tissue hung from the right side of my face. But I only allowed myself a quick glance toward the door, to make sure no one was coming to crash this party. Then I dove on top of Vera and Nicholas, using the combined weight of the chair and my frame to inflict a crushing blow.

I heard Vera's spinal column crack open, which immobilized her. To seal the deal on this, I rolled over their faces. Suffocation wasn't possible, but the flames spread across us all. I had no choice but to lie there, writhing in my own fiery hell and praying it didn't take too long for them to expire. Otherwise, there would be three smoldering corpses when Stanislav's supervisory team returned.

Luckily, the fire spread across the bonds upon my arms and hands as well, and soon I was able to tear through them. Able to pat down the flames before too much living tissue upon my upper body had died, I kept the only eye I still had—my left one—on the smoldering pile of human flesh that had been my assailants. Both were dead. But until Nicholas's legs quit moving from death spasms, I had to wait to rescue Alistair and Amy.

Both looked at me with slack-jawed fearful expressions, surely stunned by how quickly the tables had turned in our favor. Or, more likely, they were dumbfounded by the transformation going on before them. My body's regeneration process was in high gear. A familiar tingling sensation flowed down from the crown of my head toward my feet. I didn't need a mirror to confirm the re-growth of hair, eyelashes, skin, and muscular tissues. Not to mention my blurred vision in one eye soon became clear sight in both eyes. I don't always feel everything, but in all the hundreds of times I've had this experience, I've never healed incompletely. Not once—not even when I've died and suddenly ended up somewhere else.

“*W-what the hell just h-happened?*” Alistair was too taken aback not to stammer.

Yes, he’s witnessed some amazing things from dear old dad before, but nothing quite like this. Like all good parents, I hoped to spare him from ever seeing something this extreme. In fact, this was only the second time he had ever seen me kill someone, and the very first time in face to face combat. The last time had been a rifle shot to protect him from a Colombian cartel assassin.

“No time to talk about any of this right now.” I grabbed the sharpest knife I saw from the table and moved over to him and Amy. “Are you both well enough to travel?”

Not that they had a choice, but the ‘options’ for how to get the hell out of this place relied to a large degree upon their mobility.

“I can make it... just give me a moment to stretch,” said Amy, massaging her arms painfully after I sliced through her bonds. Alistair’s response was nearly the same, and he nodded that he was ready to go.

Ever the realist on what it would take to get out of there intact, I made sure that neither one needed to take care of *nature’s call* immediately. All of us good to go for the moment, I signaled for them to remain silent and quietly follow me to the window farthest from the door. As a precaution, when ready to pull open the heavy draperies, I had Alistair turn off the overhead light.

I carefully pulled open the heavy curtains, expecting to at least see a guard or two. But our captor’s arrogance had overlooked the remote possibility of our escape. This was especially surprising as the sun had long since disappeared and the mountains’ full darkness limited visibility.

“They’ll be onto us in a moment, so there’s absolutely no time to waste! Hold your questions until we get far enough away from here, and I’ll do the same,” I said. They both nodded their consent. “Let’s go!”

As I gently pulled on the window’s latch, hurried footsteps approached the front door. It sounded as if a roundup had gathered on the porch. I silently bemoaned the fact it took less than thirty seconds for the Russians to somehow realize the light had been turned off, despite the front window’s heavy curtains.

I threw open the window, and practically shoved Amy’s shaking body through the opening. Alistair was next, and he just made it outside when the front door opened. Several soldiers armed with assault rifles poured into the trailer, their heavy boots resounding loudly across the cheap flooring.

“*Ohu yxodrm!*” shouted one of the Russians in the lead. He pointed his rifle at me, just as I began my climb through the window.

“Stop William!! Stop, goddamn it or we *will* shoot you!!”

It would take so much more than loaded guns to get me to stop for Viktor Kaslow’s warning, since he intended to kill us all anyway. But as he aimed his pistol at my back, I did offer him something over my shoulder. A shit-eating grin. A really *big* shit-eating grin. After all, his sarcastic prophecy sort of came true: we did meet again, albeit on this side of the veil.

The last thing I saw from him, just before the barrage of bullets whistled above my head as I bolted through the window, was his own slight grin. One that was as cold and angry as any I’ve ever seen.

The hatred for me that had lain dormant for more than a decade was now reawakened.

Chapter 15

“*Run!*” I hissed, motioning for Amy and Alistair to meet me over by a covered jeep less than fifty feet away. “*Run and don’t stop running until I tell you to stop!*”

Floodlights that surrounded the circle of trailers had just come on, and soldiers were moving between the buildings. They would be upon us at any moment. Not to mention the other mercenaries and scientists residing in the tents along the creek.

“I see them—there they are!” shouted another man, this one with English damned near as lucid as Viktor’s and the refined guttural version of Petr Stanislav.

Other voices joined in, although too excited for me catch what they said. No matter, since we were as good as dead anyway unless we got out of there. Suddenly, Alistair tripped and fell.

Shit!

“Pops, you and Amy need to go on! I don’t... I *don’t* think I can make it!” he said, between gasps for air after I ran over to him.

Maybe he wasn’t in the best shape of his life, but a fifty-yard jaunt normally wouldn’t be a big deal for him. It made me worry more about what he and Amy had endured in their captivity. Meanwhile, gunshots pelted the ground nearby, clearly announcing our pursuers were on their way.

“You’re coming with us, son—*period!*” I grabbed his arms and lifted him back to his feet. “Don’t you ever pull that *oh please, Dad, go on without me* shit ever again! Do you understand? ... You and your mom are all I’ve got, so get it in your mind that you’re going to survive! We’re going to make it out of here *alive!*”

Although it was dangerous for him and me, I lifted Alistair onto my back and carried him over to the Jeep. But since our angry hosts had nearly caught up to us, there would be no way for me to hot-wire the vehicle in time to get out of there. So, I carried my son even further with Amy alongside me. Fortunately, only the scientists brought flashlights. It sounded like there was some confusion as to how and where to use them effectively—especially since it appeared there were only a couple available. Sheer lunacy, but I’ll take God’s help no matter what form it comes in. The lack of cohesive communication between civilian and army personnel allowed me just enough time and space to find another suitable Jeep among the dozen parked in a row.

Jeep number three was the one I picked, since it was close to the front of the line. A great number, if you think about it. God in three persons, three crucifixions, rising on the third day, the myriad multiples of three in the Talmud, and so on and so on. Call me superstitious—I’ll admit that’s true any day. Yet, more often than not, I do get lucky.

Like right then.

Not only was the vehicle unlocked, it belonged to one of the scientists. Anyone perpetually funded to play around with their pet projects is generally not the most responsible person on the planet. It certainly was the case here. The Jeep’s keys were still in the ignition.

“Keep an eye on Ali for me,” I told Amy, keeping my voice low while directing her to the backseat after I unloaded my son there. “Get in quickly, and keep your heads down!”

She hesitated for a moment, and looked as if she wanted to say something. But, a sharp glare from me invoked her obedience...at least for the present moment. She had the presence of mind to close the passenger door quietly, which bought us an extra few seconds before I started the engine and all hell broke loose.

With the Jeep’s tires spitting gravel behind us, I tore out of there. A legion of other Jeeps, and the pair of Mercedes SUVs I saw would be after us very soon. In the meantime, the latest barrage of gunfire cleared out our Jeep’s windows, but missed the gas tank and the rear tires. Most importantly, Amy and my son were spared so far.

Viktor was out to kill me, with little interest in my capture and any further possible embarrassment in front of Petr Stanislav as his chief assassin. That was my assumption at this point. Luckily, only a few bullets had hit me. Two in the right shoulder and one grazing my left earlobe. Even before we crashed through the lone guard station on the way to the main highway heading back to Tehran, the wounds were healing. It’s always faster when the bullets pass through cleanly, instead of lingering like the irritating wood splinters I used to get in my toes and fingers as a kid.

“Where are we going?”

Amy posed the question once we had put several miles between Stanislav’s camp and us. Surprisingly, so far there were no obvious signs of pursuit. In the distance ahead, Iran’s capital city was a sea of twinkling lights. The night sky had grown lighter, morphing into the predawn blue of the coming sunrise. The clock on the Jeep’s dash read 4:14 a.m. We still had time to secure a hideout before daylight nixed that option.

“We’re going back home... to the states,” I said, evenly. “It’s far too dangerous to stay here any longer than necessary to get a flight ready to depart.”

Yes, this was harshly delivered, and not merely because her leaving the hotel without me seriously pissed me off. I had to make sure there were no further screw-ups on this misadventure. Hers and Alistair’s continued existence in this world depended upon it!

“I’m *not* going back to America!” Her voice was hushed, but her tone seething. “I’ll stay until I find my brother, and there’s not a damned thing *you* can do to stop me!”

I glanced at her, not at all surprised that she was glaring at me. Sitting in the backseat, my son’s head was cradled in her lap. He appeared to sleep, but knowing how my bloodline works I seriously doubted he wasn’t somewhat awake and listening.

“They *will* kill you next time—”

“You don’t think they *haven’t* killed a big part of me already?!” she said, angrily. “They’ve taken my father, and my mother. And while you were out cold the past two and a half days, the men took their time fondling me and trying to force me to take them in my mouth. When I resisted, they hit me. Then, they *cut* me! And when that didn’t work, they took it out on your son!!”

“I’m so sorry,” I told her, my voice dropping to just above a whisper. I meant it. As sincere an apology as I’ve ever felt. What she stated literally took the wind out of me.

Like Amy, I wanted to swing the Jeep around and go after those miscreant assholes. But, unlike her, I knew we might as well just drive the Jeep off the nearest cliff and call it a day. We’d never get close to Viktor, Stanislav, or whoever else assaulted her and Alistair. It obviously wasn’t either Nicholas or Vera, as I assumed she would’ve said so.

“You’re *sorry*? Maybe... but not near enough to try and restore something to my soul??”

“You’ll *die* and so will Ali!”

“But *you* won’t, will you?” Her anger was heated enough to rouse Alistair from her lap. He sat up, wincing while gingerly massaging the ligature burns around his neck.

I wanted to reply in kind, but forced myself to wait. To stay as calm as possible, and to keep my thoughts lucid while keeping an eye out for a place to hide. Dawn might still be over an hour away, but if we could see our surroundings more clearly than thirty minutes ago, then so could anyone else. We would have to pull over soon—especially if there was any serious consideration of continuing our search for Jeremy Golden Eagle. Otherwise, we needed to get to a hospital to treat Amy’s wounds and give my son a thorough checkup for both external and internal injuries. The latter option was the only sane one.

“Well?”

“You already know the answer to that question.” I eyed her sullenly through the rearview mirror. “Unlike what you might believe, I do have much to lose. Ali is the only flesh and blood I have left to protect. He and his mother mean more to me than life itself.”

Perhaps corny, I swear those words are true. I can’t even allow myself to think about life without either one, as when I do, I feel the very essence of my soul begin to whither. If it dies, what will be left? I shudder to consider what that means, so I push it from my mind. Always.

“We should give it one more try, Pops,” said Alistair, wincing again as if speaking the words was an arduous effort. “She and I heard Stanislav tell Kaslow about a chain of caves that were uncovered yesterday afternoon. Some crystal samples found there showed a high concentration of radioactivity, which apparently is what they’re looking for.”

“No shit?”

“Yes, Ali’s right,” confirmed Amy. “Add that to what I heard on Monday, and I think Jeremy’s definitely around there someplace.”

“What if he’s dead?” I ignored the fact this might come across as insensitive. I had to make some definite decisions right then before we traveled much further. We had just passed the small village that lacked a moniker, and I remember thinking again how strange it was that any town—regardless how small—could exist without a name. “Could you handle it if that turned out to be the case?”

She didn’t respond right away. Going by gut instinct, I cut the lights and pulled the Jeep behind another row of thick evergreens a mile outside of the village. The

spot felt right to me, as if it was the safest place in the entire country of Iran right then.

“I could handle it,” she said, softly, though even in the dimness I saw fiery defiance in her eyes. “But he’s not dead... I just know he’s not.”

I cut the Jeep’s engine and listened for anything to be alarmed about, whether that was a convoy of Jeeps pursuing us, or one of the Mercedes creeping down the road behind us. For a moment, I worried about GPS tracking. But, unless such a tracker was hidden from view, the Jeep didn’t come with one.

“So, am I correct to assume that we’re going to try to find Jeremy?” said Alistair.

“Well, it depends on a few things, son,” I said. “The most important thing is if these guys come after us with full force, then we’re leaving. Period! Is that understood?”

Neither Alistair nor Amy said anything for a moment, and I watched them glance at each other before Alistair spoke.

“Yes, Pops, that’s loud and clear.”

“You don’t have to be a smartass, Ali.”

“I don’t think that was his intent,” said Amy, sticking up for him. “And we both agree with you...we will leave and forget the whole thing if we’re outmatched.”

I nodded, wondering if this would actually be the way it went down should we be attacked.

“So what are the other stipulations?” said Alistair.

I watched him peer warily through the glass-less passenger window to his left.

“Look behind the back seat and see if we’ve got anything for sustenance,” I said, while scanning the area around us. I didn’t detect anything of immediate concern, and I uttered a muted thanksgiving since the sky above was getting lighter, and visibility around us had become significantly enhanced since we pulled in behind the trees. “There could be some first aid supplies, as well.”

“There is. Supplies, food, and... it looks like there is a case of water, too!”

It was Amy who spoke, and she was unable to mask her enthusiasm. Nor did she try to veil her lovely smile. This was probably the best moment she had experienced since she and Alistair ventured into the Alborz Mountains Sunday morning.

“But it looks like the food consists only of dry products.” Alistair sounded disappointed. “Trail mix, crackers, nutrition bars...”

“Enough to last a couple of days, since there are three of us!”

Like a kid with the chance of going to a carnival, Amy would play whatever angle might get her another chance at finding her brother. I wasn’t convinced we had enough food and water to last more than a day, even after taking me out of the equation to further stretch our newfound resources.

But we did have enough necessities to support a return to the hornets’ nest. Food, water, supplies, and a head start were all good things. Plus, my son and the woman who held such sway upon us both could now rest for a few hours before we engaged in a second round.... Our second attempt to find the elusive Garden of Eden.

Hopefully, it wasn’t a bigger mistake than the first try.

Chapter 16

I waited until the sun began its daily climb above the eastern horizon before rousing Alistair and Amy. Somehow they had managed to position themselves to where both slept comfortably in the backseat... well at least as comfortable as cramped quarters would allow. I wanted them to catch a few hours sleep before we launched ourselves back into insanity. Besides, it seemed like a good idea to allow the locals their Muslim prayer customs before trekking through the village again.

Yes, that was the plan... to *walk* back toward the drilling site. Apparently Amy overheard another scientist talk about an ancient well near the gate at the rear of the village. The well was supposed to be the main source of water for the villagers until it dried up a century ago. Since Stanislav's scientists would also be looking for this well soon—along with mercenaries on patrol and on the lookout for us—driving the stolen Jeep didn't seem like a good idea.

When she first mentioned her idea of trying to find this well, which might actually be a part of the extensive cave system where her brother could be hiding, I was skeptical. But while waiting for her and Alistair to awaken, it started to make sense to me.

More often than not in my double-millennium existence, ideas that at first seemed insane but later have grown on me have, in fact, turned out to be spot on—dead spot on. Many of my coin recoveries have worked that way, and some of the crazy encounters with other immortal beings were born from the absurd hunches—the proverbial *wild hair up my ass*, so to speak. Often, it starts with a subtle trembling sensation in my gut. A similar experience visited me that morning while watching the sun peer over the taller peaks in the Alborz range.

It felt right. If Jeremy Golden Eagle was still alive, that's where we'd find him—I was certain of it.

"Hey, why didn't you wake us up?" Alistair accosted me as I returned to the Jeep after taking a short surveillance stroll around the immediate fifty-foot perimeter of the vehicle. "We wanted to travel in the coolest part of the day, Pops, before the sun came up. Now, we'll sweat like pigs!"

Like he wasn't already in sore need of a bath. For that matter, all three of us were a bit ripe. But so were many of the locals we would encounter shortly, since western hygiene wasn't the standard here in the *town with no name*.

"Then we should fit right in," I teased. "All you need is a kippah and wooden sandals, and then you'll really be styling it!"

Amy chuckled, which broadened the smile upon my face. Even Alistair cracked a slight grin while shaking his head.

Yes, that day promised to be better than the night before.

"I suggest you both eat something, and then we can be on our way," I said. "Trail mix and a couple of nutritional bars should do the trick!"

I laughed lightheartedly. Without waiting for their response, I went ahead and gathered the other supplies we might need. A compass, flashlight, and a flare gun were the most useful of the pile of crap in the back seat. Along with a GPS tracker, which was thankfully turned off, I found a lightweight tent in the rear of the vehicle large enough to house two of us. That, of course, would be for my more

frail companions, since I could deal with the elements that wouldn't leave any lasting effects on my physical person. Unfortunately, the scientist to whom the Jeep was assigned must be a rare Russian pacifist, as I found no weapons of any kind.

"So, you're actually going to do this?" Amy seemed pleased, once I returned to the front of the Jeep where she and Alistair waited for me. She looked amazing—vibrantly alive, despite light bruising on her face from yesterday's ordeal. She had managed to repair her blouse to where her other injuries were hidden from view. "I thought you said exploring the old well was a *complete waste of precious time and a sure way to get our asses turned into an Iranian stew!*"

"That still might be true." I motioned for them to follow me back onto the path that led to the village's main entrance. "Especially, since we have no artillery to ward off Stanislav's soldiers. But, perhaps we will reach this well you mentioned before they do."

I knew they both would keep pace with me after a comment like that... a little coercion from one of the best manipulators to have ever lived. I chuckled, especially after seeing my boy's expression. Pained... like he truly dreaded the potential hazards involved with this second excursion. Surely, he would've been quite content to head back to Tehran. Perhaps another example of how Amy's charms continued to pull on his chivalrous instincts?

"What's so damned funny, Pops?"

"You," I told him. "I can read you so well, son."

He started to say something—likely something smartass—but I picked up my pace before he could get it out. It probably was foolish for me to say what I did, since often the *professor* side of my son's personality could turn a short discussion into a drawn-out debate.

"Or, so you think!" he called after me, sounding indignant.

He sped up to catch me, and Amy caught up to him. She locked her arm inside his while giving him a playful look. He was in the process of trying to say something else to me. But as she drew his attention to her, his mouth closed as if some invisible hand had reached inside his head from the back and shut him down like a ventriloquist puppet.

Much more effective than I could've done, I shot her a thankful look and turned my full attention to the path ahead. The village entrance, marked by a smaller gateway than the one in the town's rear, had just come into view. Instinctively I scanned our surroundings, opening all of my senses to determine if any hidden dangers lurked nearby. So far, there was nothing I could pick up on

"We'll need to be careful once we enter the village, since Fajr may still be in progress," I advised. "If we got here earlier, we might've faced a good old fashioned stoning for interrupting the beginning of their day. I'd say it's worth sweating a bit more, wouldn't you two?"

I heard a chuckle from her and a groan from him.

Meanwhile, a trio of men came up to us just as we reached the village entrance. All three were dressed in long robes in a mixture of purple, red, and green hues. They reminded me of what my Hebrew brethren wore many centuries ago. And after some initial seriousness in their expressions, each one's countenance was

transformed to looks of peace and joy once they recognized me from a few days earlier.

This increased my nostalgia, and I remembered how it was when Jesus travelled through the sea towns near Galilee. All of us—his disciples—were dressed like this, and walked with him either at his side or trailing close behind. There were once seventeen of us—five more disciples than the commonly accepted dozen, and two of these were women. That’s another subject for a later time.

I assumed the man in the middle was their leader, a handsome middle-aged patriarch. Taller and more assertive than the others, he remembered our conversation from the other day, when we spoke in a feudal form of Persian from when the Shahs first came to power. His light green eyes were aglow with compassion. A wide, generous smile spread across his face once he recognized Alistair and Amy from their Sunday visit.

As when we spoke previously, he was the only villager who seemed to understand any English, though not the modern terms and phrases. When I tried to describe the abandoned well we sought, at first my mixture of English and ancient Persian seemed to confuse him. Luckily, Alistair was here this time. Using a combination of gestures and a more modern Persian dialect, he soon made headway toward finding specifics on where the old well sat.

“Zoran stated to me that the well we seek sits less than thirty cubits from the gate carved in the mountainside,” said Alistair, translating what the man had told him once the trio had stepped back through the entrance, where they motioned for us to follow them. A glint of excitement and dread danced within my son’s eyes. “There apparently are two wells...one much older than the other. Both are hidden within the brush, and one is home to the deadly vipers we discussed the night Cedric was attacked... Are we really sure we still want to do this?”

I guess we just found the limit on Alistair’s chivalry barometer. Oh and for those unaware, a cubit is the distance between the thumb and another finger to the elbow of an average person. Of course, what an average person was twenty-five hundred years ago when this system was widely used is significantly different from the modern average Joe. I guess the last time these folks took a math class was back when the ancient Greeks occupied Persia. Suffice it to say, I interpreted Zoran’s advisement to mean the standard definition of a cubit—eighteen inches or so. That would put the abandoned well we sought roughly forty-five to fifty feet away from the gate.

“Did he say which well has the vipers and which one didn’t?” Even Amy’s tone bore a little trepidation.

“Or better yet, did he tell you how we would even be able to tell the difference between the wells?” I added, always ready to throw in an impish ante. They both looked at me with expressions of sudden horror. This was going to be such fun! “I guess we’ll find out soon enough... they’re waiting on us to rejoin them.”

I pointed to where the men stood, just outside the most ancient looking building in the town; a rust colored earthen structure that damned well might be as old as me. Unlike my previous visit, there weren’t many other villagers present. Just a few here and there and none near where the threesome waited for us.

When we reached the odd-looking building, Zoran motioned to one of his associates to enter it through the only opening I could see, apparently to retrieve

something. With no windows and a conical shape, it reminded me of an upside down flower pot.

While we waited, I tried picturing where the wells could both be sitting. I suddenly remembered the spot where our CIA liaisons had buried the cache of weapons set aside for us. I couldn't believe I had forgotten about the guns and other ammo! There should be a couple of assault rifles and at least one pistol still there—not to mention several grenades I remembered seeing on Sunday.

I could hardly wait for us to get fully armed, and then play it by ear from there. Meanwhile, Zoran and his companion stood watching the small doorway their cohort had disappeared through.

“What are we waiting on?”

Despite acting like he didn't understand much English when I previously visited this place, Zoran gave me a perturbed look after I voiced my question. He motioned emphatically for us to wait... that it was *crucial* to allow his cohort time to return.

With the morning's coolness rapidly evaporating away, I worried about Stanislav and his army. Would they continue to stay the course they had started, and forget about the three pesky Americans? Or, did they realize there was much to lose if we got away and were already planning to come after us? Yes, they could've looked harder for us the night before, and did not. But, we certainly wouldn't receive the same warm welcome we got the first time, if they found us spying around their operation's perimeter again.

All facetiousness aside, this got me thinking. At the very least, Petr Stanislav had to know that the entire gamut of intelligence agencies around the world already knew what he was up to. They had to know that he was using technology that could easily bring every global power to its knees if the fusion technology demonstrated thus far were used for even less-than-noble aspirations besides destroying virgin mountainsides. Stanislav already qualified as an international threat on the FGRs environmental destruction alone. What would happen if there really were something inside one of these mountains that enabled this asshole and his cronies to take over the entire world?

Yes, I'm sure that was indeed why the CIA sent me out there—to determine if this was the truth of the situation or not. I thought it was just some billionaire nut case searching for the latest version of the Holy Grail, and nothing more. I planned to take a few surveillance photos and call it a day. Then, Alistair and I would've had plenty of time to search for the latest silver coin in Al-haroun.

If only I had researched things a little more, I might've figured out more specifics surrounding what at first looked like chasing a fable... the Tree of Life.

Zoran's pal soon emerged from the building, and I saw him climb stone steps when he stepped outside. Who could tell how big the small-looking structure actually was, or what hidden place the stairs led to? It would remain a mystery at present, as the wooden door was quickly shut and then secured with an ancient iron lock.

The man carried a large clay urn and once he handed it to Zoran, he motioned for Alistair, Amy, and me to kneel before him in the dirt street facing the building.

“What the hell's going on, you two?” whispered Amy, alternating glances at both Alistair and me.

“It looks like some kind of ritual is about to happen,” said Alistair, smiling nervously at Zoran, whose expression was as sweet as a Raphael saint depiction. “What do you think, Pops?”

“I have no frigging clue, son.” I was concerned about having anything unknown poured on me—especially anything coming from some dark place hidden inside a strange old building. Despite the fact that Zoran and his people had been very kind and gave off no negative vibes to me, the only immediate comfort was an overpowering scent of olives... olive oil. “I say we just roll with it for now.”

Zoran stepped up to Alistair and splashed the urn’s contents onto his head. Really, it was more like a solid drenching. Next, he moved onto Amy and then me.

The liquid was definitely oil... somehow old, and yet not rancid. It carried a unique property, as a slight warmth and tingling sensation embraced my face and neck—not so unlike what I often experience with my body when it heals. Only this sensation lasted for just under a minute, and then it felt like the oil somehow disappeared. When I looked over at Amy and Alistair, I watched droplets of oil upon their faces literally shrink and then vanish altogether.

“Now you will be safe inside the caverns,” said Zoran. “Stay together and be humble before the Almighty, and no harm will come to you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. The man spoke fluent English. I started to get angry, feeling duped by his charade from earlier and especially the song and dance routine we went through on Sunday. But then I noticed a slight glow upon his face, most noticeable around his eyes and lower forehead. I could’ve missed it, as it steadily faded. And as it did, the next words out of Zoran’s mouth were a mixture of gibberish... the speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*, that some religions—especially radical Christian sects—still practice.

“I think we should be on our way, don’t you, Pops?” said Alistair, a little more nervous than before.

I think this was more a need for affirmation that things would assuredly be okay. Amy looked at me the same way. Both were visibly stunned by what just happened, and now looked to the one non-normal human being in the bunch for a secure point of reference in this suddenly crazy world.

“Yes, I believe we should go.” I offered an assuring smile for both him and Amy, and a polite head nod to Zoran.

Zoran responded with the same broken English-old Persian mixture he spoke with before the recent bizarre event.

“I will never forget your kindness,” I told him. I motioned for Amy and Alistair to walk ahead of me toward the rear of the village where the immense gate sat. “May the Lord God bless you always.”

He nodded and then chuckled, and his two companions chuckled along with him

“And may He one day forgive your grave trespasses, William Judas Barrow.”

I had already directed my attention to the gate, which stood less than a half mile away. I was determined to claim our weapons quickly, and try to find the entrance to the caverns mentioned by Zoran. But hearing his voice speak pure English again made us all whip our heads around.

But by then the mysterious trio had vanished. The small town with no name and a weird building as its most notable hallmark sat deserted. Only a gentle breeze remained, brushing against our faces as if urging us to get moving.

We didn't need any further incentive.

* * * * *

“Pops... Pops! ... Pops!! *Slow down* for Christ's sake!!!”

I could hear Alistair's pants behind me, but we had to move quickly. I should've known that Zoran's salutation was as much a warning as it was a goodwill statement. Once we were within a quarter of a mile of the gate I heard the soft purr of a motor. At first, I thought it was a truck. A big truck less than five miles away.

If only that had been the source for the steadily growing rumble in the air.

“Ali, something bad is about to happen—*very* bad—so I need you to get your ass in gear!” I told him over my shoulder, motioning again for both him and Amy to step up their pace.

At the moment, they both looked confused. I forgot that sometimes I can hear things on a different level than most folks. I don't think it's a supernatural trait, as I had the same problem as a child, when high-pitched voices from young children and infants used to send me into a violent rage.

Luckily, as I grew older, my oversensitive ears improved to where I could function almost as well as anyone else. As an immortal, the pitch of a noise no longer sends me through the roof. But I do hear a lot of things that most human beings can't, and I've caught myself noticing the same pitches that cause your poodles and German shepherds to perk their ears up.

So, it wasn't until Amy started to hear the noise too that she urged my boy to keep up with her while we sprinted to the gate.

“Keep up with me, Ali—*please!*” she cried, yanking on his arm while looking fearfully at me.

Just then a pair of Russian helicopters suddenly appeared in the valley where the village sat. Once the pilots spotted us, they veered the choppers hard toward us, sending a spray of bullets that just barely missed Alistair's and Amy's feet. As I feared, Mr. Stanislav didn't take kindly to our escape, and probably received some kind of 'heads up' that we were on our way back to his illegal operation. Sending a pair of military helicopters after us further confirmed the notion that he was no longer interested in capturing us alive. His mercenaries could've waited and ambushed us if that were the case.

“They're turning around to make another pass!” I called back to Amy and Alistair, slowing down just long enough for them to catch up to me. At this point, I hoped my personal enemy from long ago, Viktor Kaslow, was more interested in killing me than them. If so, I planned to be the one who got shot—knowing I may never see Alistair or Beatrice ever again. My boy's immediate survival overrode all else. “We're going to have to make a run for the gate right *now!* *Come on!*!”

The look of abhorrence on Alistair's face would've been comical had it happened at any other time. I could almost see the images of scorpions and snakes slithering beneath the thick brush surrounding the gate's marble pillars in his panicked mind. Meanwhile, one of the choppers moved ahead of the other, launching a

rocket that whizzed above our heads and crashed into the mountainside a hundred feet beyond the gate.

“Get your asses moving, damn it!!” I shouted, fighting to keep my own rising panic at bay.

We were running out of time to find someplace safe. The helicopters sped after us flying parallel and hovering less than ten feet above the ground. We would never survive the ensuing gunfire. I used every ounce of physical energy and skill I had in order to save my boy, and the beautiful girl who had become a royal pain in *my* ass for bringing us back to this deadly place. Too late to retrieve our weapons, there was absolutely no chance of effectively defending ourselves against these frigging bastards.

With bullets tearing up the dirt behind us, I grabbed them both and shoved them forcefully into the brush—deadly vipers and any other critters be damned!

I heard Alistair’s scream first, followed by a cry of unwelcome surprise from Amy. Desperate to save them, I immediately combed my hands through the prickly bushes and weeds, flicking off another scorpion whose rock-covered lair had been disturbed by either Amy or Alistair. But they were nowhere to be found. They had vanished, leaving behind not a single clue as to where they went.

I called out frantically for them—crying their names as a volley of bullets hit my arms and my legs. Staggering through the brush, the sandy soil around my feet suddenly gave way. I felt something metallic beneath my shoes... some kind of metal sheet. Or, maybe it was a trapdoor? Before I could look behind me to see if a kill shot was on its way, it slid open. I was dropped down into a deep dark shaft. Screaming.

Chapter 17

The drop could’ve been much worse, despite slamming into a slick rock surface that propelled me down into deep coolness. I heard Alistair’s and Amy’s panicked cries from somewhere below me.

Well, at least they’re alive...

I continued my descent for what I believe was two to three hundred feet, speeding down a stone chute and scared shitless I would slam into one or both of them, possibly crushing either one to death.

Suddenly, the primitive slide veered around a corner and I began to see light... light that was soft and barely discernable. More like a greenish haze. Soon the light grew brighter and wider, forming a line on the horizon before me. At the same time, I heard the sound of trickling water and a louder swishing noise just ahead of me.

Then all at once, I was thrown off this crazy ride into a glowing pool of water. Water that was cold as hell, I might add.

I hate surprises like this one—even worse than being shot at by hostile helicopters. Nothing bothers me more than frying my ass in 100 degree weather one moment and then being dumped into frigid coolness the next. Hell, maybe that’s an ingredient from the one effective recipe to kill me, and my cells know it.

Fortunately, I could see my environment well enough. I was in a fairly large cave, and literally thousands of glowworms covered the bottom of the chilly pool I had been dropped into. A nearby spring that bled into a sheer waterfall was the pool's source. As I looked around me, there were other glowing critters crawling upon the walls of the cave. A fairly large effervescent purple and amber spotted serpent of some kind crawled back and forth behind the waterfall, as if guarding the area.

I also noticed other reptilian creatures that were smaller than the serpent. Each one was almost transparent except for blue and purple outlines along their bodies, like some kind of subterranean jellyfish that had gone amphibian at some point in time.

"Owww..." My son moaned from somewhere nearby. To my left? That's where his voice emanated from. "It looks like m-my... my father h-has g-gr-graciously decided to j-j-join us."

Alistair laughed at his own joke, though weakly. He was shivering terribly. I felt a surge of panic, as his wheezing alone told me that he had sustained some sort of injury from the sudden fall into this place. When I looked in the direction of his voice, I saw the dark outlines of two silhouettes sitting on a ledge near me, eerily illuminated by the myriad organisms surrounding them. I recognized Amy's full, long locks that had been drenched in the water.

"You need to get out of there, William!" Her voice was cracking, filled with fear. Unlike Alistair, she wasn't shivering. "There's something in the water that bites! It nicked me, but latched onto Ali's abdomen before I could free him!!"

Her dim figure moved toward me, offering a hand to help me out of the pond. I had been treading water, leery of letting my feet land on the host of squirming iridescent worms below me. I swam over to her and scrambled to get out of the water—far more worried about Alistair's welfare than the fact I sensed something moving rapidly toward me from my right just beneath the pool's surface. Here we were, a few hundred feet below the planet's terra firma, and if my son had endured a bite from a poisonous creature there would be little I could do for him. I pushed away the terrible thought that I might watch him die on this trip after all.

Suddenly, something huge exploded out of the water, snapping at my feet with near-invisible jaws before it disappeared in the pool again. I say *near*-invisible, as once my eyes adjusted to the unusual colorful living lights around us, I discerned the outline of a twelve-foot translucent eel with long, sharp teeth in its snapping jaws. It came up again, snapping madly at the air where just moments earlier my legs had dangled while I finished pulling myself out of the water.

"Are you all right?"

I posed the question to Amy, though it was intended for both of them. I kept a watchful eye on the thing lurking in the water until I was confident it wouldn't try to follow us out of the pool.

"I think so... but Ali's really hurt!" She moved aside to allow me access to him. "He landed hard in the water and then that thing bit him! I'm really scared for him!!"

"Me, too," I said weakly.

I felt my mind start to go numb. I could see the bloody wounds seeping through Alistair's shirt... two deep gashes from the thing's teeth. I prayed fervently in

silence that the creature wasn't poisonous, and that the wheezing I heard was from a non-immediate, life-threatening wound to the base of his left lung. Regardless, I had to get him out of there... I had to find some way to get him back to the village. Maybe Zoran or one of his buddies could save my boy. But how to make that happen? After all, the only way back up to the surface I could immediately see was the open shaft that dropped us down into the water... at least fifteen feet above our heads.

"Ali, hold on for me, son!" I was struggling to keep my voice smooth and calm. The last thing he needed was his old man debilitated by stark fear. "I'll carry you, but you've got to hang on!

"I'm t-t-trying, Pops... I f-feel so tired... just let me r-rest..."

His words trailed off. I could tell from the eye movements under his closed eyelids that his eyeballs were dancing wildly... like they might roll up into this head while his body gave into a terrible seizure.

I could no longer control my rising panic! He might die anyway, but I had to do whatever I could to save the only offspring I've ever bonded with. A huge part of me felt as if it was dying right alongside Alistair.

I desperately scanned the room, praying for an opening that might lead us back to the earth's surface. But it was almost impossible to determine a promising exit from a dead end. The few tunnels I saw were filled with one form of fluorescent creature or another.

Then I glimpsed a brighter light emanating from behind the waterfall. Could a passageway exist on the waterfall's other side, and would it lead to some place promising? We had no choice but to find out.

"Help me stand Ali up, so I can carry him over my shoulder!" I urged Amy. "We've got to move now!"

"Move *where?*" Her voice was shrill, and such distress could easily become another hindrance to Alistair's rescue. "There's nowhere to go!"

"There is someplace to go! Just trust me and follow my lead, damn it!"

Suddenly, the serpent hissed loudly from behind the waterfall, as if it sensed my intent to shoo it out of its lair. It slithered closer to us, and I saw the brighter light again in the bottom right corner of the small cove it guarded.

"We need to reach the passageway behind the waterfall," I said, assuming Amy could see it. The serpent eyed me intently. Perhaps it sought a weakness to exploit in the same manner as I did. "If you follow my directions precisely, we might still get out of here in time to save Ali!"

I'm not sure that she fully comprehended what I said. Her gaze was locked onto the hissing critter as it opened its mouth filled with needle-like sharp teeth and two prominent fangs. It wasn't until I nudged her shoulder that she even looked over at me, nervously. Meanwhile, Alistair's pained groans grew more plaintive. Motivated by that, she lifted his left shoulder while I raised his right side. It was almost impossible to ignore the much smaller worms wiggling across the ledge surface beneath our feet. I prayed she didn't become squeamish, and lose her grip on him when the little critters exploded into slimy green goo with each labored footstep toward the waterfall.

The serpent prepared for our advance, its tail producing a barbed tip that throbbed like an angry rattle.

“Keep moving, Amy, no matter what happens!”

She simply nodded. Her wide-eyed expression announced she was too damned scared to say anything. The ornery critter slithered back and forth while it awaited our arrival. Its orange eyes were ignited, as if the sucker received a sudden boost from the very fires of Hell.

I often experience some apprehension when encountering a new menace. Despite my unique healing abilities, facing unknown sensations brought on by a novel combination of bite and venom injection is something I dread. If this serpent, which I could tell was more of a hefty snake than a lizard, hit an artery with a powerful injection of neurotoxins, I might black out. I'd lose the race to save my son.

A delicate operation at best, it was made worse by the pile of human remains I had just noticed near one corner of the bastard's lair. At least the pile was on the opposite side of where I wanted Amy to focus. It looked like a handful of skulls and femurs along with a broken ribcage.

Little shithead likes the way we taste... this keeps getting better and better!

I made a sudden lunge at the waterfall to draw the menace out, loosening my grip on Alistair long enough to throw a misdirection juke at the serpent, snake, or whatever term would correctly describe this glowing monster. As I hoped, it attacked empty air where my right leg had been for an instant. I grabbed its throat with my left hand, just below the fangs and high enough to keep it from jabbing them into my wrist and arm.

“Oh my God—be careful William!!” Amy cried out, as she struggled to keep my son from falling to the ground while I sought to subdue the angered reptile.

Another loud splash drew her frightened eyes back to the pool behind us. The eel had leapt onto the ledge, its tail thrashing in the water behind it. Obviously, it intended to come after us. My own distraction from this allowed the slippery critter I battled to slip slightly from my grasp. I fell down on top of it, praying mightily that it couldn't somehow bite me or pierce my midsection with its barbed tail.

The eel's eerie screeches were followed by another bigger splash. Along with Amy's panicked shriek, I knew it had managed to climb onto the ledge and heard its initial movements. I had only a few seconds to resolve my current battle before these two predators created a formidable team.

I relied solely on my instincts. I secured my grip on the ornery bastard beneath me and tossed him at the eel. I didn't bother to see if I scored a direct hit or not, since all hoped for was a slight head start. No doubt the malicious pair would pursue us together—as ridiculous as that mental image seemed to me.

Adding to our woes, the tunnel's opening was much smaller than I had assumed originally. We'd be damned lucky if any *one* of us squeezed through without a hitch—much less all three.

“Come on, Amy!! You need to go first!”

I grabbed her arm to pull her up to the passageway's entrance. Her initial response was surprise at being jerked so harshly by me. But, the hostile noises behind us got her moving...at least for a moment. Then she noticed a myriad of the shimmering critters covering the walls just inside the narrow tunnel.

“I-I can't go in there!” She anxiously looked back and forth from the passageway to the serpent-snake thing and eel creeping toward us. “I can't go—”

“Yes you can, and you *must!* Otherwise, we *all* will die here!!”

Out of the corner of my eye, the predatory pair had slithered to within ten feet of us. Still, she didn't move.

“You've got to go first, so I can push Ali through the passageway behind you. Then, I'll bring up the rear,” I told her, lowering my voice and changing my tone to that of a trusted confidante. “But, if you don't get your gorgeous ass in gear, little lady, I'm going to drag him through there myself! You can fend for yourself against our latest friends any way you can. So, which do you prefer?”

She didn't answer, and remained frozen by fear. I couldn't wait any longer. My son was on the verge of losing consciousness, and I grabbed his shirt by the neck as I prepared to drag him through the tunnel.

“No, wait—*wait!* William, I'll do it!” She stopped me, scooting as close as she could while the snakelike monster weaved its way toward her... less than three feet away. “I'll go first. Just get out of the way!”

Like it was my fault that her luscious legs were about to make a meal for one of our two pursuers! Before I could send a snide remark back at her, she grabbed my son's shirt collar from me and crawled into the tunnel. I moved quickly to lift Alistair's near-limp body and pushed him into the passageway, praying to God Almighty for forgiveness and protection if this turned out not to be such a brilliant idea. I heard Amy gag and wretch just beyond my view, cursing about the stench when the glowworms exploded against her hands, body, and head. But at least she kept moving.

I glanced behind me as I dropped to my knees, noticing that the eel had caught up with the other critter. They both bore down on me and soon were within inches of my left foot. I shoved Alistair's feet forcefully enough to send him several feet into the glowing shaft. The gruesome bug popping continued. But, at least the glowing slime served as a lubricant to help his body move through the tight squeeze.

That left me just a second or two to get my ass in there with them. I scampered into the tunnel, pulling up my legs in a fetal position to try and avoid the pair of angry snapping jaws barely missing my feet. I prepared for the excruciating discomfort of having my toes or an entire foot severed. But, miraculously, the pair remained outside the tunnel's mouth, writhing in anger as if forbidden to follow us inside. I took full advantage of their limited vigil, pushing on my son's ass and urging Amy to keep moving.

“Can you see anything yet?” I called to her, once we got far enough from the tunnel's entrance to be reasonably safe from an unprotected attack from the rear.

“*Oh, my God... Oh My GOD!!*” she cried out. Unlike earlier, her shrill voice bore the distinct sound of awe and wonder.

“*What?!* What do you see up there?” I tried focusing all of my senses on her and what she was experiencing.

“Oh, my God... William, *hurry!* I just reached the end of the tunnel, and this is so incredible! You'll never believe what I'm looking at unless you see it with your own eyes!!”

What in the hell?

Suddenly, I heard slithering noises behind me...coming up fast! I had seriously underestimated the ill-will I had caused the two apparent guardians of the pond

and this passageway. If anything, the smeared guts from the destroyed glowworms would speed their arrival.

Thankfully, it sounded as if Amy had crawled out of the tunnel. With one last powerful shove, Alistair soon joined her. I uttered another quick prayer for his safety since I realized he fell out of the damned tunnel with no way to protect himself. I started to call out to them, but my words dissolved before they left my throat. It started with an extremely bright light entering the tunnel from where Amy and Alistair had exited. That alone would've supported Amy's excited reaction moments earlier. But, what I saw next with my own eyes far exceeded that wonder.

As my slime covered head and torso peered out through the tunnel's end, I beheld a world that until that moment I believed was pure fantasy. It didn't seem real... how could it be real?

What sat before us—what *surrounded* us—was a garden of sorts. A magical garden...

The Garden of Eden.

Chapter 18

I fell out of the tunnel, not caring where I landed. The ground was laden with soft grass. Grass, I should say, that gathered onto itself where I needed a cushion and then evened out again after I landed safely upon it. Amy and Alistair were lying on the grass nearby. Amy sat up with a look of complete contentment upon her face while Alistair slept soundly next to her. His breathing steady, it gave me hope that I had a little more time to find a way to care for his injuries. More importantly, there were no more slithering noises coming from inside the tunnel. We were no longer in immediate danger.

Where we landed, was at the edge of an incredibly beautiful meadow. I imagine some folks out there are ready for me to say that we stepped out of one reality and entered into a spectacular realm that stretched for miles and miles. Like *Harry Potter*, or something Aesop and the Brothers Grimm might concoct.

Not so. Yes it was truly amazing, and altogether unlike anything I'd ever seen. But the entire area extended no more than half a mile in any direction. We were in another room that belonged to the cave system... albeit an enormous room wider than several football fields. That's considering the width of the room. The height was a whole other beast to consider. I couldn't see the room's ceiling, and where the apex should be was a swirling combination of orange, blue and purple lights beyond wispy white clouds. It was as if a beautiful sunrise, or sunset, from the world outside had been sucked into the very top of the mountain we were presently within.

And how do I know it was a mountain? Well, that was more from what I learned later on, though it made some logical sense at that moment. The inward tapering walls of this enormous cave room bore the same groove striations and slick surfaces that I've often seen when spelunking through the hundreds of mountain cave systems I've visited during my long stay on earth. The same trickling water

that dripped down the walls was present, as well. Only in this strange environment the walls were covered with bright green moss and algae.

A gentle stream coursed through the meadow of unique green and purple grasses, colorful flowers, and other plant life. Everything was in some ways similar to, and yet, different from anything I'd ever seen before.

In addition to the soft lights above that reminded me of an evening and morning sky, an extremely bright ball of light emanated from near the very center of the cave. Like a miniature sun or virgin star, it swirled slowly above the cave floor a quarter of a mile ahead of us. The terrain sloped down to this light from where we were, giving us all a clear view of everything else that had elicited Amy's amazed and reverent response earlier.

Two tall waterfalls emptied into a large pond to the right of where this light hovered, and what looked like a small forest of tall, thick green trees formed an arc on the other side of the light, to our left. It looked as if we might encounter some of this wooded area if we were to wade through the meadow toward the light. In front of the light sat an incredible garden filled with exotic-looking flowers, the likes of which I'd never seen anywhere on earth before. The flowers' rich cinnamon and honeysuckle-like scents filled the warm air around us... air that was clean, fresh and entirely free of pollutants. Like one might find on an uninhabited tropical island.

As I mentioned, there were many things in this place that had compatible counterparts in the 'outside' world. Not just plants and such. I had no desire to find out what kind of fish and other creatures flourished in the stream and pond ahead of us, but flocks of colorful birds that ranged from finch cousins to those as big as condors flew all around us. Their songs were amazingly beautiful. Deer-like animals were also plentiful, with the key differences from their cousins thriving above ground being their three-toed feet instead of hooves, and their eyes. Their eyes' iridescence was more vivid than the creatures we had just suffered through.

"Isn't this incredibly awesome?" Amy's intense green eyes shined brightly with excitement. Stunning. I'm now talking about her. Really, I can't recall any woman I've known down through the centuries having eyes as ablaze as this female's. Even my Beatrice—as gorgeous as her eyes were in her youth, couldn't quite compare with Ms. Golden Eagle's fiery emeralds. "If this really is the Garden of Eden, then I know in my heart that Jeremy has to be around here... someplace!"

Like a young kid, she seemed ready to run through the meadow of this unspoiled paradise, calling her brother's name and perhaps even skipping through the meadow like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

"I would think if he's actually here, he would already know that we're here. Right?" I had a hard time warming up to the reunion she sought, since going out of the way to make it happen had proven disastrous for my kid's health. I moved over to Alistair, to check the strength of his vital signs. "Maybe your brother needs a moment to detect our presence. Be sure to yell at the top your lungs, so he has a smidgen of a chance to hear you."

Ahhh, it felt so delightful to be a smartass again! She took it well, responding with a playful scowl. Really, it was all in good fun. Besides, if Jeremy really was there then great, and if not, then we needed to get busy finding an exit out of there. Especially since Alistair's breathing had worsened again.

“Jeremy!!!”

Huh? I guess she took me seriously. I didn't expect her to respond to a dare. Her yell echoed eerily throughout the cave.

“Well, if he's here, there isn't a doubt in my mind that he heard you loud and clear, little sister,” I said, offering a wry smile. “In the meantime, we need to get busy finding a way outta this place before the Sirens make us forget about leaving!”

Rather than respond to my wit this time, she looked over at Alistair, lying on his stomach and struggling to breathe again. Her serene countenance faded while she studied him.

“Yes, you're right,” she agreed. “We need to get help before Ali gets any...”

Her statement unfinished, we had just heard something, or *someone*, stepping toward us from behind a tall tree nearby that resembled a walnut tree. Both Amy and I moved to protect Alistair, who remained asleep despite his discomfort. I tried to convince myself that his soft snores were a good thing... that somehow he'd be all right in the end.

My heart fell when I saw the barrel of an assault rifle pointed at us. I assumed that Stanislav's mercenaries had followed us down the chute, or found a different entrance into this magnificent place.

“Who in the hell are you?”

From behind the tree, the male's voice mimicked Amy's accent.

“Jeremy? Is that really you??”

Amy sounded tentative, as if she feared being disappointed.

“It is Jeremy,” replied the voice, equally tentative. “So it's really you, too, Amy?”

“Yes!”

The rest of what she said was a mixture of squeals and saying his name over and over again as she ran to the tree. I remained poised to come to her rescue, but soon she emerged hand in hand with a strikingly handsome young man. Clearly related to her, he bore the same raven hair and chiseled facial features, along with the same eyes... piercing green lights that surely reflected similar passion to his sister's lust for adventure. Only his build was different, as Jeremy's six foot frame and powerful physique hinted at a previous life as a successful athlete as compared to her slender form.

“William, this is my brother, Jeremy,” she said, proudly. “And the man lying on the ground is William's father, Alistair.”

Jeremy's dazzling smile faded once he saw my son, and completely fell when she told him what had befallen Alistair.

“It's a pleasure, Jeremy,” I said, studying his facial expression. Something deeply alarmed him about my son's condition. “Amy has told us so much about you.”

“Hopefully it's all been good,” he said, forcing a weak smile despite his serious tone.

“It was,” I deftly cut to the chase about Alistair. “As Amy told you, my father was bitten by some kind of eel with jelly-fish characteristics—no doubt poisonous. Do you have a first aid kit with you by chance?”

“Yes, I have some medical supplies,” he said. “But, your dad's color is bad, and he'll need more attention than I can give.”

“We’ll take whatever you can afford to give us. If we could just—”

“I might be able to get you something far better than anything modern medicine has to offer!” he blurted out, suddenly, perhaps not even aware he had interrupted me. “But first I have to make sure you’re protected.”

“Protected?”

“Yes, protected,” he repeated, solemnly. “You can all easily die here if you’re not protected.”

Amy and I already knew about other critters carrying potentially nasty bites, but I could tell he spoke of some other menace. The fear in his face said it was something far worse, and obviously something that wouldn’t be easily intimidated by the late-model Izhmash assault rifle he carried.

“What do you mean we can die?” I said, frowning, I’m sure. “Are you talking about Stanislav’s men?”

“No... no, It’s not them,” he said. “I’m talking about a creature that guards this place. If we can avoid him, I might be able to get you to a place that can eradicate Alistair’s injuries. There’s a man in the village near here called Zoran... have you met him?”

“Yes, we met him twice, actually.” I was curious as to what the strange leader of the village could do for us. Especially since Zoran resided at least three hundred feet above where we were right then. “The second time was less than an hour ago, when he poured some weird oil concoction on our heads.”

“He did that?”

This news seemed to impress Amy’s brother.

“Yes, he did!” enthused Amy. “He poured that shit on our heads, and right after he did it the oil evaporated off our heads.”

“Or, it was somehow absorbed into our skin,” I corrected her, gently, wondering if I should add anything else.

“That’s exactly what happened to me last winter, when I ended up lost after escaping Stanislav’s camp!” Jeremy’s eyes were on fire like his sister’s peepers earlier. I could only imagine what a family get-together is like with these people. “He told me that it would protect me from harm—and it has. Without it, you could never get close to the Tree of Life.”

Zoran’s advisement from earlier replayed in my head. His sudden disappearance into thin air, along with all of the wonders kept secret far below his sacred little town, put a whole new light on this shit.

“How is that so?”

I was glad Amy posed the question instead of me. I wanted a little more insight into how her brother rolled.

“There’s an angel—a *real* angel—who guards the tree, which Dad told me to look for if I ever found the Garden of Eden. The last papyrus he was working on, before Stanislav murdered him and Mom, talks about the curse of death that awaits any unwanted visitors to the sacred garden,” Jeremy explained. “I didn’t encounter the angel until after I had been in the garden a week or so. Scared me shitless, man... He stands about twelve feet tall and is built like the Greek gods of ancient lore. His face is more beautiful than any woman I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ve heard that description before.” I knew the full truth of what an angel looks like, having encountered several of these beings face to face a number of times

during my existence. Of course, that would remain private information at the present time. “What’s his name?”

“His name is Ophanim,” Jeremy said. “It wasn’t the name I expected, since the name Jophiel appears several times in the Tibetan text that my father and I both translated.”

And here I thought it would be Raphael, since that was the angel’s name in the Eden stories I grew up with. Wonders never cease.

“Very well... so it is Ophanim,” I said, and then motioned to Alistair. “I take it that whatever idea you have of aiding my father has something to do with this angel. Correct?”

“This is true, at least in a sense. But rather than tell you how this might work, I’d prefer to show you. Come with me!”

The confident glint in Jeremy’s eyes and the easy, genuine smile on his face would command respect from many a man or woman. Thinking along these lines made me wonder how Amy dealt with her big brother’s powerful charms. At the moment, she seemed to study his face as if she just recently noticed something different about the sibling she had not seen in roughly a year. Perhaps it was the slimy glowworm remnants that she’d inadvertently transferred to him when they embraced earlier. But once he aided me in carrying Alistair, she shook her head and looked away. She smiled sheepishly, as if she had thought something a moment ago that she now understood was untrue.

Ever curious about the quirks in people’s behavior, I was keen to keep an eye on this situation, hoping to learn at some point what she found so odd in her brother’s appearance or persona. If I hazarded an immediate guess, it would be that this wonderful environment had somehow changed the person he was to a new man. Perhaps, even transformed him to his very core.

Jeremy swung his rifle over his shoulder and came over to where Alistair laid on the ground. Thinking it might help things if my son were awake, I tried to rouse him from his deepening slumber. But it was no use—not even our combined efforts could awaken him. The three of us lifted him, with Jeremy and me grabbing Alistair’s shoulders and Amy carrying his legs.

We set out toward the light, wading through waist-high grass. I kept my ears tuned for anything slithering beneath our field of vision. Fortunately, we reached the edge of the wooded area that separated us from the incredible flower garden in front of the light fairly quickly. Like an immense opal, the brilliant white glow shimmered with an array of rainbow hues swirling within. It grew more intense with nearly every step we took toward it. Like something inside the light knew we were coming.

As we stepped through the woods, I noticed a huge black panther resting between two large branches of what looked like a thick birch tree. The animal was enormous but didn’t seem interested in finding out how we tasted. For the moment, it casually regarded us as we passed by, its luminous yellow eyes monitoring our progress. Both Amy and I kept our own watchful eyes on the beast, and she damned near jumped out of her skin when it emitted a low-pitched ominous growl.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Jeremy. “Neafari scared the hell out of me too, but she’s never pursued me. Ophanim keeps her fed and happy.”

‘With what?’ I wondered silently.

The feline was as big as a prehistoric saber tooth, measuring at least a dozen feet in length. I couldn’t see her fangs at the moment, but that hardly mattered since she had claws as large as my head. Despite Jeremy’s second assurance of safety, I continued to keep an eye on the panther just the same, more than a little worried about a possible attack from behind.

We hurried into the garden, and again I was hit with a powerful sense of amazement. Multitudes of flowers that were similar to roses, chrysanthemums, and hyacinths abounded all around us. There were many other floral species as well, and some of these resembled daisies, orchids, and violets. Like the panther in the woods, I caught the tallest of these flowers turning to follow our progress as we continued toward the light.

I wished we had the miniature cameras given to us by Cedric. Unfortunately, the final two that survived our collective misadventure had since been discovered and destroyed by Viktor Kaslow, according to Amy. I doubted Jeremy had a camera. But, maybe that was just my assumption based on his nonchalant reaction to everything we had seen so far.

“We’re almost there,” he announced as we neared the swirling light that had become fervently intense. I expected the light to become uncomfortable to look at, but for some reason, it didn’t bother my eyes. Nor was it a nuisance for Amy or Jeremy. As we moved closer to the light, it seemed to revive Alistair. My heart began to fill with hope.

“He’s coming around, isn’t he?” said Jeremy, studying my face. I’m sure my countenance had brightened considerably at the prospect of Alistair’s recovery.

“I think so—God I *hope* so!” Amy eyed my boy lovingly.

Seeing their reactions lifted my heart further, and I eagerly followed Jeremy’s lead as we continued to carry Alistair. We stepped through misty tendrils drifting down from the light’s main source. I suddenly realized that what looked like a giant ball of light was nothing of the sort. It was more like a tall spherical canopy that hung down from some invisible point. We stepped under the mist, and I allowed my gaze to travel upward until I gasped.

I couldn’t help myself. Seriously. In fact, I can’t recall when I’ve experienced a greater sense of awe and wonder in my entire life! Definitely not since shortly after my betrayal of Jesus and my botched double-suicide attempt—which was the first time I encountered an angel.

But this was beyond all that—*far* beyond it. An enormous crystal formation stood before us, sculpted by nature many eons ago. Looming well over a hundred feet above the cave floor, with a thirty-foot wide base, it reminded me of the giant oaks that thrive in the southern United States. But like I said, it was a crystal structure and not an organic monument like the famous Live Oak near Charleston. Almost turquoise in color, in some ways its porous appendages resembled the colorful coral stalks near Belize and other tropical water paradises throughout the world.

Mere words can’t describe it. Especially the feeling that came over me as I stopped and stared stupidly at this thing... the *Tree of Life*! It wasn’t just me who reacted like this. Amy wore an incredulous expression on her face while her knees trembled to the point they actually knocked together.

As for Jeremy, he looked on reverently. He had become quite familiar with the 'tree' during much of the past year. His eyes bore a glint of impishness. It was as if he had a secret he could hardly stand not sharing, but waited for the right moment to spring it on us.

He looked down at Alistair, who was sitting up. We had laid him gently upon the ground before us a few moments earlier, but I hadn't noticed that he was awake until just then. Alistair's expression was one of astonishment, even though he still winced from the wound in his abdomen.

"William, help me assist your father over to the stream," said Jeremy.

"What stream?"

I had been so enthralled with the tree's impressive height and breadth that I hadn't noticed the bubbling water flowing near its base. Incredulous that I missed even hearing the water's gurgle, I was still shaking my head about it as we lifted my son to his feet. He staggered gingerly toward the stream, though eagerly, as if he were a man dying of thirst.

I felt a powerful pull from the tree's life force as we followed him. I could tell it called to each of us, perhaps to our spirits or souls. All I knew for sure was that I felt completely unable to resist, wanting to dive into the rippling clear blue water and cross over to the crystal's enormous base. Unlike the frigid pool from earlier, this water carried humid warmth. Like a hot Turkish bath, tiny clouds of steam wafted off the stream's surface and gently rose into the air.

Jeremy removed his rifle, and the satchel he carried over his shoulder. He then stepped into the stream, seemingly unafraid of what might be lurking in the water.

"Alistair, come here!" he said, his arms opened wide like a new messiah. There was that impish look again. "William and Amy, please join us in the water. Could one of you open his shirt, so I can easily get to his wounds?"

Another ancient memory flashed before my eyes. This one was of my old friend John ben Zechariah—Jesus' closest family confidante other than his mother—and how he once motioned to me in the same manner while standing in the shallows of the Jordan River. That event transformed a mere spectator of the Gospel ministries into an eager participant. It played no small part in my fanaticism that would later lead to disenchantment when neither John nor Jesus had any interest in overthrowing King Herod and his Roman pals.

Amy gently opened Alistair's shirt, while my son offered little help or resistance to her. It was the same deal when we guided him into the water, both of us on either side as we steadied his steps and kept him from falling into the water. Soothing warmth moved into my feet and legs, undeterred by my clothing. Amy's nervous smile told me that it was a similar sensation for her. I couldn't tell what it was like for my son, since he remained silent. But he wasn't grimacing anymore.

"May the Lord have mercy on you, Alistair," said Jeremy, which drew a disdainful look from his sister.

This surely was a side of Jeremy that she'd never seen before. How interesting... This could lead to some serious fun later on, when the devout agnostic went toe to toe with the nubile religious convert. Save me a front row seat and some buttered popcorn for that one.

Jeremy didn't seem to notice her reaction, still wearing the bemused expression from earlier. He cupped his left hand and scooped up some water, using his right

hand to pull my son close to him. When less than a foot separated the two, Jeremy dripped part of the water on top of Alistair's head, and then he rubbed the rest into the puncture wounds in his abdomen.

What happened next should not have surprised me. If it had been me and my body, it wouldn't have. But to see my son's wounds close and lighten in color, and then become a perfect flesh-tone match with the surrounding skin was astounding. The very first time I've seen this transformation happen to someone other than me!

"*What in the hell?!*" Amy's voice was barely audible.

She shook her head slowly. I knew right then that her seeing this miracle made an even deeper impression than watching me heal from severe burns less than twelve hours earlier. Surely, it was because of her brother's involvement. It's a whole different ballgame seeing someone you've known all your life—especially a sibling—do something miraculous as opposed to a relative stranger.

"Pops, Amy... who's this guy?" Alistair gave Jeremy a wary glance after looking around, completely disoriented. "Where in the hell... wait, is that what I think it is?"

He suddenly gasped, while his eyes followed the height of the fabulous crystal formation in front of us. Apparently the expression on his face earlier had nothing to do with his conscious awareness. He started to move toward the *tree*, but slipped and fell into the water. Jeremy and I quickly pulled him back to his feet. The toxins might not have been thoroughly eradicated from his system yet. At least his mind seemed fully alert.

Meanwhile, Jeremy's playful confidence had faded slightly, as a trace of confusion slipped into his expression. Amy beat me to the punch in trying to explain why the older man in the group had addressed me as his parent.

"We have a lot to discuss, Jeremy," she said. "I'm sure you'll end up with as many questions about these two as I have about you and what has changed—*Oh, my God!*"

She suddenly reached up and ran her hand against his cheek. She next looked over at Alistair. At first, I was just as lost as Jeremy looked right then... until I noticed something odd about my son. He looked rested... *really* rested. Like he had finally gotten enough sleep to erase the dark circles under his eyes. But then I noticed that the lines and wrinkles around his eyes and along his forehead were a little less noticeable than they'd been just minutes before.

"I knew you looked different when I first saw you earlier!" Amy exclaimed, and her excitement continued to rise. "Somehow, you're *younger!* Ali just got younger—*Look, William sees it too!*"

"Is it something in the water?" I deadpanned.

Yes, what just happened surprised me. But after centuries of surprise, it doesn't last long anymore. Five to ten minutes, tops, and I'm normally on my way back to my preferred mischievous persona.

The look that Amy cut me so reminded me of Beatrice long ago, right after Alistair was born. It's never a great idea to be a smartass with a Celtic woman—especially a direct descendant of the mercurial Pixies. "If it's not a time for jokes, don't make one," she'd say. "You look like a boorish jackass, William!"

From the look Amy gave me just then, apparently it's the same deal for a temperamental Native American descendant.

"He's close to the truth about this place," Jeremy advised. "The healing comes from the crystal—Dad's 'Tree of Life' that he spent the last twenty years of his life looking for. Then it's carried by the water, since the crystal's base touches the stream."

It made logical sense to me.

"All I know is I feel different... actually *better* than I did before I got hurt," said Alistair, before crossing to the other side of the stream. His gaze again traversed the full length of the crystal tree and beyond. "In fact, I haven't felt quite this good since I was his age."

He pointed at Jeremy, adding a warm chuckle.

"I assume you are the illustrious anthropologist, Dr. Jeremy Golden Eagle," continued my son. "How did you end up down here?"

"Similar to you three, I was running for my life after Ethan was murdered. Zoran and his people hid me from Petr Stanislav and the leader of his army, Viktor Kaslow," he said. "I knew the Garden of Eden had to be inside one of the mountains surrounding the village, but I couldn't find it until Zoran anointed me and made me worthy of the discovery. When Stanislav's men overran Zoran's village last year, Zoran and his high priests brought me to the mouth of a small cave and told me how to find this place. Here I am."

"I am sorry about what happened to Dr. Langford," said Alistair. "I met him once at a Middle East conference nearly six years ago."

"I believe he mentioned you to me around that time," Jeremy told him, his eyes misting. "And I've read a few of your essays myself, Dr. Barrow."

While it was marvelous to see my boy and Amy's celebrated brother forge a bond, this was hardly the place to share academic accolades. For the past few minutes, I had felt uneasy, as if we were running out of time again. Out of time for what, this time? I wasn't sure. But as I mentioned before, my deep gut feelings are usually quite accurate.

"Guys and Amy, we need to get moving."

All three looked at me as if I'd just sprouted horns and a tail. I joined Alistair beneath the magnificent crystal tree—this Tree of Life that seemed to send waves of goodwill and sweet peace through me, enough to threaten the effectiveness of my survival instincts. I determined right then to ignore anyone's resistance as well as stick with what my mind knew was best for us. We needed to leave right away!

"Jeremy, what's the quickest route to get back to the surface?"

He looked totally confused for a moment, like my question itself didn't make any sense—at least not in this place. But after I repeated my query with a little mustard on it, he gave me an answer.

"It's behind the taller waterfall on the right side of the crystal," he said. "There's a path that encircles the cave and winds all the way up like a corkscrew until you reach the top of the waterfall. A hidden doorway hides a short tunnel that leads back to the surface, exiting out through the southwest side of the mountain."

"I don't see why we have to rush out of here, Pops." Alistair stroked his beard thoughtfully while touching the amazing crystal surface of the tree. Lightning-like plasma traveled through the tree and touched his fingers. Although no harm came

to him, touching the energy surge seemed to tickle his fingertips, he later told me. “We can stay here for a day or two, I’d say!”

“But we’ll be sitting ducks if we do that. The longer we stay the less chance we’ll have of gaining the upper hand on Stanislav.”

I tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, but that feeling of dread was getting stronger by the moment.

“I’m not ready to go—”

“Damn it son, we *need* to go now!”

Definitely a moment of karma, since the exchange and Alistair’s whine were the sort of things I missed by exiting his life when he was just a pup. What an inopportune time to be dealing with such shit now!

“I think William’s right, Ali,” said Amy, and her tone sounded uneasy. “We should leave...as soon as possible we need to be on our way!”

Woman’s intuition plus my own apprehension should have made this an easy triumph. But it didn’t.

Alistair shook his head defiantly, like he truly was a young teenager again. He looked over at Jeremy for support, who shrugged his shoulders.

“If you think you’re staying here, Jeremy, you’ve got another thing coming!” I could tell from Amy’s worried tone that she thought this was exactly what he intended to do. “Well?? Are you both going to make this difficult and waste precious time, or can we *please* get going?!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Jeremy, quietly and with even more defiance than my boy had responded with. “I’m *never* leaving this place!”

“*What?! You must* leave since it means being *safe!*!”

Amy was on the verge of uncontrolled hysterics. As much as my gut told me trouble was right around the corner, her instincts were more on top of the situation than mine were.

“Let me settle this right now!” I said, taking charge while eyeing my son solemnly. My thinking at that moment was if I could get Alistair on board, then the Golden Eagle boy would be an easier target to manage. “We’re leav—”

The rest of what I had to say was drowned out by a sudden, huge explosion. At least, that’s what it sounded like at first to my mind. I wasn’t prepared to watch solid rock dissolve before my eyes. One of the cave walls dissolved into thin air as a pair of bluish FGR beams appeared to our left. All at once, the real sunlight I had so eagerly longed for flooded this world, where it hadn’t reached for many thousands of years.

And just like that, a world ruled by bioluminescence was now threatened by an omen of wanton destruction...

The end, so it seemed, had come for the Garden of Eden.

Chapter 19

In under a minute, nearly one hundred Russian mercenaries poured into the open wound in the mountain where the Garden of Eden laid hidden for many more millennia than I’ve been in existence. Behind them were several Jeeps equipped

with rocket launchers and one oversized loader. These were in addition to the trucks carrying the immense FGRs, actively employed right then.

More and more of the mountainside disappeared until enough material had been displaced to allow the vehicles unhindered access into the cave. Layers of precious gems briefly appeared in the disintegrating cave walls and then vanished, leaving only a tiny memory of their existence with anyone fortunate enough to witness this disturbing phenomenon. Namely our little group. The Russians scarcely noticed any of this. Nor were they concerned with the unique ecosystem they were carelessly destroying under their oversized tractor wheels.

For that matter, their entire fleet of vehicles and infantry moved across another meadow toward us with resolute purpose. Their lone focus was the Tree of Life. We now had firsthand knowledge of its healing powers. Especially the healing powers of a living stream that flowed close enough to the magnificent crystal structure to capture its essence.

We only had a minute or two to seek cover, since they approached from the other side of the crystal tree.

"Everyone stay low and follow me," I said, quietly, while motioning for Alistair to stick with me. Jeremy and Amy followed close behind. "We'll need to hide somewhere in the woods, until we can figure out what to do next."

"We're not going to let these assholes come in here and desecrate the one honest-to-God sacred shrine in existence, are we?" Alistair's tone was filled with disdain that I knew could easily escalate into full-blown anger at any moment.

"Until we can come up with a foolproof plan to stay alive, that's exactly what we're going to do!" I urged everyone to make a beeline for the large tree where the panther had been perched earlier. The tree was empty at the moment. "These guys won't give a rat's ass whether we're dead or alive—I damned well guarantee it!"

"I can stay behind and try to pick off as many as possible," Jeremy offered, checking his rifle as he prepared to head back to the crystal tree that was growing darker. Its dominant color had changed to purple, almost amethyst, as if the structure itself understood the gravity of our present predicament. "I'll meet up with you guys once I take a few shots at that bastard, Stanislav!"

"*What?! Why in the hell are you in such a hurry to die?*"

Amy stomped back toward him after she said this. I couldn't hear the exact conversation, but she and her brother traded a few more statements made in anger that were followed by her desperately trying to grab the weapon from him.

"*What in the hell is up with you two?*" I hissed in anger.

The two most educated people in our foursome were acting like a couple of spoiled brats. Livid, I hurried back to them. We were losing precious minutes—even seconds—with this bullshit.

"*Stanislav and his men will be here at any moment!!*"

"You're wrong once again, Mr. Barrow!"

Before a troop of Russian mercenaries closed in on us from all sides, I heard an older Glock pistol being cocked from nearby,^{*)} just a foot or two behind my right ear. The rich smell of Cavendish drifted toward me, and I immediately recognized the gun, tobacco, and the thick Russian accent of the voice. The sibling Golden Eagles' angry expressions from a moment ago were now wholly subdued, and fearful. Even their matching brilliant emerald eyes appeared muted.

“We are already here!”

The chuckle that followed was sardonic, and I turned my head slowly to face my longtime nemesis. Viktor Kaslow. I couldn't believe I didn't hear or even feel his stealthy approach from behind me. Anger tends to dull my senses... I genuinely hate it when I get pissed off!

Dressed casually, except for the black riding boots he's always favored, Viktor pulled out his cigar and tapped away the ashes that passed dangerously close to my face. He grinned maliciously, and I could tell he intended to milk my current predicament and presumed demise for as long as possible. Like I've stated, I never worry for me—not ever. But right then I was scared shitless. Scared for Alistair's welfare, as well as for Amy and Jeremy. Two pups with the vast majority of their lives still in front of them, and the kid I couldn't bear to part ways with.

“This is between just you and me.” I was unsure how to proceed against my longtime enemy. He truly had the upper hand at the moment. “Let the others go, and I'll give you no trouble.”

His grin widened to a contemptuous smile—one that lacked any sign of warmth, though his eyes bore a mirthful glint. Not a good combination when dealing with this asshole. So many close calls with death in the past... I had survived Viktor Kaslow's knife attacks, grenades and rigged explosives, machine gun fire—you name it—during the past twenty-some years. From Istanbul to Moscow to London, and once in New York, never had he succeeded in inflicting a mortal wound. I regretted more than ever not erasing him from this life when I had the chance in Athens fourteen years ago. Mercy then needed to be repaid now, and I implored the Almighty in silence to spare three lives and only take mine if it came down to it.

“Ah, yes, my dear William... I expected you to seek their protection,” he said, his tone scornful after he secured the bonds that held my hands behind my back. “Unfortunately, they will all play roles in the celebration of the discovery of what we've come for... the Tree of Life!”

He motioned for the soldiers closest to him to move in and disarm Jeremy. Jeremy and Amy both resisted, fighting and cursing the Russians who fell upon them. But the soldiers soon prevailed, securing them both. My son was still too disoriented to offer even slight resistance, and as my hands were held tight a sickening feeling filled my stomach. Visions of being forced to watch Alistair, Amy, and Jeremy tortured to death filled my frightened mind. Then it would be time for Viktor to decide the manner in which he wished to dispatch me.

“*Get your dirty, slimy hands off me, assholes!*” shrieked Amy, when one of the soldiers groped inside her blouse.

When Jeremy tried to come to her rescue, another soldier slammed the butt of his rifle against Jeremy's head. He crumpled to the ground, and from where I stood I saw a small river of blood pour down the side of his head. Amy cried out even harder, trying to reach him while another soldier smacked her in the face.

“Let them go!” Alistair cried out, before I heard another gun-butt crack against his head. Enough to stun him into silence, though his head wound looked less severe than the blow delivered to Jeremy.

“Predictable responses. Wouldn't you agree, William?” Viktor crowed. He motioned for the assault on Amy to cease.

The soldier grinned in response and pulled back the beret they wore. I was surprised to see it was a female and not a guy, as I had assumed from the attack. Of course, the gender of the assailant mattered little. The mortified look on Amy's face matched mine, and she tried unsuccessfully to take a shot at the soldier. Viktor raised his hand again, this time to stop the soldier from using her rifle as a club against Amy's face.

"Stop, Caprea! Leave some fun for all of us," he said, his tone bearing an unsettling mixture of joy and callousness. "Just let me have a final word with my old friend William and then you all can do what you will with his unfortunate companions."

Think fast, William... Damn it, THINK!!

It was up to me... and yet what could I do? An aggressive move borne out of misplaced bravado would certainly spell a quicker end of Alistair's, Amy's and Jeremy's earthly stay. No way in hell I'd take such a gamble.

By my estimate, there were nearly eighty mercenaries along with Viktor and a crew of scientists presently making their way around the Tree of Life. The scientists were measuring the crystal's base. I wondered for what purpose?

Then I watched in further horror as one of the scientists set explosives around the entire perimeter of the tree... spacing them in a radius roughly ten feet from the outer core of the structure. The Russians were planning to uproot the tree! But the loader didn't look big enough to carry it, so were they planning to harvest only the roots of the crystal?

"Well, then... are you ready to meet your maker, William?" Viktor returned to where I stood. A thousand thoughts raced through my mind. "Maybe you should get on your knees and give thanks, that I won't make this as painful as you made things for our two colleagues you murdered yesterday morning...hmmm?"

The glint of supreme amusement danced within his icy blue eyes. They were lighter than when we last faced each other, in the wee hours of that morning. I wanted to gouge them out, and then tear the obnoxious grin from his face.

"Or, maybe you should just pack up your shit and take your stupid ass out of here along with these other Soviet jerk-offs before the angel who guards this place shows up!"

Not the wittiest thing I've ever come up with and I wish I knew where it originated from. Really, I had no prior intention of saying something as silly as this, despite the fact I had been wondering what in the hell was keeping Ophanim from his Garden of Eden duties. Still, the words brought a sense of power, and a sudden feeling of excitement quickened my pulse. One that gained strength despite Mr. Kaslow's derisive snicker that soon erupted into uproarious laughter.

"An angel, eh? Seriously, William—that's the best you can come up with?!" He laughed harder, which brought out more of his natural Serbian accent. Even the sullen army gathered around us was snickering. "Perhaps, Petr—soon to be the most powerful man in the civilized world—perhaps he would like to comment on your suggestion... Petr?"

Similar to the last time we met, Petr Stanislav soon appeared from my periphery. His imposing shadow briefly blocked out the crystal's light as he stepped in front of me. As before, his lovely breath threatened to draw out the remaining contents of my stomach through my mouth as one explosive attack

directed at his noxious person. Since it would only hasten my death sentence, I swallowed hard to keep such an event from happening.

“Yes, Mr. William Barrow, tell us about your angel!” Stanislav sneered, pushing each word at my nostrils, as if he wanted me to inhale his foulness in its entirety.

His light gray eyes seemed even more lifeless than before. I’ve heard there are people born soulless. He could easily be such a man. Subtract his enormous wealth and size and he would be nondescript as a person, sad to say.

“Is it someone famous, like Gabriel or Michael? Or, maybe it is the legendary Raphael who is said to guard this place?” he continued to taunt. “It does appear that he failed to do an adequate job of keeping *evil doers* out of Eden! Maybe he should retire. Or, better yet, trade shifts with the Mormon’s Moroni, whom everyone can see atop their famous Tabernacle back in the country you should’ve never left, you foolish man!”

Like Viktor, his initial chuckles soon swelled into an unpleasant surge of uproarious laughter. Then he requested the slim Glock in Viktor’s hand.

Before he simply pointed the barrel at my forehead or heart to end my illustrious existence as William Judas Barrow, I had one last chance to say something that could change my fate. Even if it bought just another thirty seconds while he and Viktor chuckled some more.

“You’re wrong about the angel’s name, and you’d better hope you haven’t pissed him off for your sakes! His name is Ophanim, and I’d be willing to bet your wealth and mine that he’s more than a tad upset that you’ve carelessly changed the décor around here!”

For a moment, Petr Stanislav glared at me in angry silence, while a slight smirk tugged on the corners of his mouth. I thought for sure this would be when he raised the pistol and placed a searing bullet through my head or into my chest. But he chose instead to laugh again, and as Viktor joined in, the laughter quickly spread to everyone. Everyone, I should say, other than Amy, Jeremy, and my son who had regained consciousness.

But then another sound overrode the laughter, though it started subtly. It sounded like a high-pitched whistle, barely audible I’m sure, except to someone with my set of ears. But as the whistling noise grew louder, everyone’s attention was drawn to the northwestern corner of the cave. A slender orange light appeared in the air. The light resembled a vertical pole or staff, and as it drew nearer to us the brilliant image seemed unstable as if it were flickering.

“What in the hell is that?” Alistair squinted his eyes. No doubt, he missed having his favored eyewear on hand. “It looks as if someone’s holding a light... someone very big!”

Someone as big as Goliath... although opaque, and barely visible. Someone who could fly through the air with ease.

All eyes were drawn toward the figure, whose speed picked up considerably once it spotted the hundred or so humans gathered near the Tree of Life.

“Is that Ophanim?” Amy’s tone clearly revealed her astonishment—especially as the figure suddenly bore down upon us.

She had seen some pretty spectacular things already in the presence of *yours truly*. But, sadly, I can’t compete with the unearthly beauty and fierce presence of

this kind of immortal being—one whose age easily runs in the tens of thousands of years.

“Yeah, it is!” said Jeremy, his countenance revived. “He’s come back to protect the sacred garden!”

The siblings Golden Eagle looked like matching Hummel figurines—at least that’s what they reminded me of, with upturned gazes in quiet fascination. And who could blame them? Ophanim’s majesty is almost beyond description. And when I say ‘him’ it is in a very loose sense. Guardians like this one are far too splendid in their beauty and raiment to be considered pure ‘males’. Keep in mind also that only a few breeds of angels can actually propagate. I’m sure any avid readers here have either heard or read about the creators of the human giants mentioned in the Talmud, or Old Testament of the modern Bible. Those angels are not of the same ilk as one like this.

Almost godlike in his comeliness, his facial features were aglow within light bronze skin. For the moment, his skin was translucent, as if this wonderful and fearsome being was partially invisible. Think of a fine cut-glass statue when the sun’s rays hit it. Ophanim’s current appearance was like that. His deep lavender eyes were aglow with intensity that many might mistake for friendliness. But I knew better, personally knowing the passion such a being brings to heavenly assignments.

He was pissed... royally angered, to the point the violet, gold and white feathers in his near twenty-foot wingspan fluttered in irritation. Like a proud barn owl, whose nest had just been pilfered by a band of rodents. I should also add that such beings are superior readers of danger and ill will directed toward the innocent... or to them.

The scientists murmured amongst themselves while the mercenaries aimed their weapons at the angel. Even Petr Stanislav and Viktor Kaslow took an aggressive stance. Stanislav pushed out his chest like some territorial gorilla, and Viktor took back his beloved pistol. He pointed it at Ophanim’s midsection, just above the angel’s golden tunic. Meanwhile, Amy and Jeremy drew closer together, and I made a protective move toward my son. Even for the uninformed, it would’ve been easy to tell the angel-fearing foursome from the infidels.

I doubt the vast majority of the men and women gathered in the open cave right then would’ve ever guessed what was to come next. I’ve come to believe that none of them understood that the glowing shank carried forward by Ophanim was a weapon, although surely they should’ve known to stay clear of the molten shaft of metal that looked like a giant fiery sword which had just been smelted on an anvil and not allowed to cool. It would make sense—perfect sense. Instead, once the angel was within a few feet of the first victim in the carnage that followed, Viktor ordered his mercenaries to shoot it.

Oh, what a regrettable decision!

Thousands of bullets from the latest automatic weapons bounced harmlessly off Ophanim’s near-transparent body. Some of the errant gunfire chipped one of the few cave stalagmites in the area, not far from us. The crystal tree’s luminance grew slightly brighter from the stray shots that glanced off its surface. Of course, a few of the soldiers and one scientist were also hit, collapsing to the ground or falling into the stream. They were the lucky ones.

Ophanim's eyes flashed brightly with anger, and then the angel disappeared... or so I thought. But two rows of mercenaries soon collapsed where they stood. Cut down in pieces, some were decapitated and the rest were simply cut in half through their midsections.

The burning stench of flesh, blood, and other things that make us human filled the air. It almost entirely drowned out the floral fragrance I admired so much upon our arrival in the garden.

"Don't move, Ali—stay down with me!" I warned my son, when his primal instincts to run for cover kicked in. "Submission is the only thing that an angel will understand as a peaceful gesture."

"Not so fast, William! Come with me!!"

Viktor grabbed the back of my shirt collar in an attempt to lift me to my feet. He only had one hand to work with as he held a rocket launcher in his other hand. I glanced over at Amy and her brother. The towering figure of Petr Stanislav loomed above them, threatening them with a rifle.

My immediate thought was this must be Viktor's and Petr's 'Plan B'. They didn't sound like they believed in angels earlier when they disparaged my mention of Ophanim, and perhaps they still didn't. But evil conniving miscreants are the same as the not-so-bad cunning guys—like me. Sometimes we have no choice but to come up with an alternate plan of action on the run. Hey, if it works for star quarterbacks and parachuting CEOs then it should work fine for the rest of us. Right?

Just as long as it doesn't mean trying to outfox the more powerful beings in the immortal world. I'd much rather go toe-to-toe with the oldest, most blood thirsty vampire than an angel who's been scorned. Hell, maybe that's where the popular adage comes from after all.

"Petr, bring them to me!" Viktor advised, motioning with his arm holding the rocket launcher for his boss to bring Amy and Jeremy to a nearby Jeep where he was attempting to drag me. Meanwhile, Ophanim was ripping through the rest of the mercenaries still trying to follow their boss's orders to bring the angel down. "We need to crack the crystal to get the *djaval* to stop!"

Huh?

Apparently our Russian counterparts do believe in something—just not a protector assigned by God. Just another instance where accepting the devil is an easier deal than God Almighty.

Petr Stanislav picked up Amy and Jeremy with no more effort than a nursemaid holding a couple of newborns. But before he took a step toward the Jeep, the angel was upon him. Unlike the shimmering blur that had nearly destroyed his entire army, Ophanim rose into the air above him, eyeing Stanislav in anger. Even the angel's full wingspan mimicked its owner's disdain, twitching noticeably. The sword gleamed in his left hand as he pointed it at the Soviet billionaire.

"Fuck you, *djaval*!" Petr sneered, aiming his weapon at the angel's face.

He laughed contemptuously while Amy and Jeremy squirmed to escape his gasp. Jeremy's determination allowed him to slip free, and that was enough to distract Stanislav. Before he returned his gaze to Ophanim, the angel had brought the sword down, severing Stanislav's arm at the shoulder. The gun fell harmlessly to the ground, as did Amy.

Petr Stanislav fell to his knees, screaming in agony while he struggled to grab his severed right arm with his left. I expected Ophanim to finish the job on him, perhaps bringing the sword straight down again and splitting the hefty Russian in half. But the angel ignored him and leapt over to where Viktor was losing his battle to get me to cooperate.

Ophanim glared at all three of us, and for a moment, I thought he had decided to kill all trespassers instead of sparing the ones anointed by Zoran. Instinctively, I moved to shelter Alistair, fairly certain I could survive the attack from one of God's special servants. But don't think I wasn't praying harder than I had in years... centuries, actually.

For the first time in I don't know how long I cringed, like a mange-infested dog about to get kicked. I even almost closed my eyes... but I didn't. Good thing, since I would've missed all the fun of Viktor Kaslow's death dance with his *djaval*.

I have to hand it to my nemesis. He somehow managed to keep his wits long enough to point the rocket launcher at Ophanim's midsection as the twelve-foot angel towered above him. But before he could get the damned safety released, Ophanim knocked the launcher out of his hands. Viktor's death would've happened quickly, perhaps even painlessly at that point. If only the release on his weapon had remained closed.

It didn't. As soon as the rocket launcher fell to the ground, a rocket screamed past Ophanim's head. The swerving sucker raced toward the Tree of Life. When it hit the upper 'branches' of the immense crystal, Ophanim let out a gut-wrenching cry and immediately flew toward the gaping wound in the Tree of Life. A blast of glowing crystals flew out of the tree in all directions. Sharp shards ranging in color from brilliant green to soft purple flew all around us. Most were fairly large, measuring several feet in length, though I saw some fist-sized fragments whiz by. As tempted as I was to linger on the angel's extraordinary image as it drifted toward the brilliant hole in the Tree of Life with its full wingspan glowing in magisterial beauty, the survival of Alistair, Amy, and Jeremy overrode all else.

A large stalagmite I'd noticed earlier offered the best protection. Before the heaviest onslaught of shards reached us, I urged everyone to race over to it with me. Luckily, the stalagmite bore a crevice on its eastern side with just enough room to shelter us all. Jeremy pulled his leg inside it as a barrage of crystal splinters began to fall around us.

Like a heavy hailstorm, the assault lasted for nearly twenty minutes until the eruption from the Tree of Life finally waned, which gave us a chance to loosen and remove each other's bonds. Luminous fragments rested in haphazard piles around us. Being the one with the least chance of getting hurt, I ventured out from our shelter first.

The stillness was unsettling, and even the birds and other singing creatures from earlier were dormant... or did they even survive the crystal shard assault? When I looked around, the army of mercenaries and scientists lay dead around me. Even the hole created by the FGRs had shrunk significantly, as apparently the fragment shower had somehow affected the time it took to reverse the fusion machine's effects.

Petr Stanislav lay motionless near the Jeep, a deep crimson pool still spreading around the back of his head.

Dead.

At least the world was a better place again, although time would tell if it was safer. It would be only a matter of time before some other megalomaniac obtained this technology and used it for ill gain.

I ventured a short distance further to make sure the area was safe enough for the others to emerge from their present hideout. As I turned to go back and let them know the coast was clear, I saw Viktor Kaslow lying in his own pool of blood. One of the crystal shards had pierced his heart and he was near death, his eyes already glazed over.

“So you win... you win this time, William,” he whispered, between coughs of blood. “Perhaps it will be different when... when we meet again...”

That was the last thing he said, and I could almost see his spirit withdraw. To Sheol, or do other cultures have their own hell to reside in? I don't know... maybe it's all the same. Both for hell and heaven. I'd like to think so.

As a gesture of respect, I squatted down beside him and closed his eyes. Then I called to the others, letting them know it was safe enough to join me. Amy and Jeremy ventured first, followed by my boy—always the gentleman.

“Well, I guess we need to find a way out of here.” I glanced back at the hole in the cave wall across from us. It was still shrinking, and at a rate that was quicker than I thought we could beat. My instincts told me that we'd find a solid wall of rock waiting for us by the time we reached the spot that still allowed the late afternoon sunlight inside this place. “Maybe one of the waterfalls will have an exit behind it that—”

“Oh, my God—watch *out!*” Amy shrank back to where Alistair stood.

My son wrapped his arms around her protectively. If not for the knowing, peaceful smile upon Jeremy's face, I would've whirled around defensively, expecting an attack from some new menace. But when I looked over my shoulder, I found Ophanim looking down at me.

Seeing an angel up close has always been a bit intimidating, and I'm sure most folks would feel the same way. Unless, I suppose, one was to hobnob with a creature like this on a daily basis. Standing a dozen feet tall with wings rising another four feet above his shoulders, Ophanim studied me, wearing a curious look upon his face. As I mentioned before, his incredible eyes could easily fool someone into thinking he favored them, and then find out all too late that it wasn't the case at all. I worried he might fault us for what happened to the Tree of Life. Fortunately, when I glanced at the crystal tree, it was hard to detect where the wound from the rocket had been. The Tree of Life appeared to have healed itself!

“You must all leave here,” said the angel, his voice musical in its timbre. “Very soon, the place where you now stand will be no more. The garden must be protected, as it is Elohim's will to do so. Jeremy can lead you out of here, as he knows the way. The magi—Zoran, Gaspar, and Balthasar will aid you from there. Go quickly!”

Before any of us could engage him in further conversation, Ophanim suddenly disappeared. It wasn't until I felt the soft rumbling in the ground beneath my feet that I saw him again, flying toward the swirling sky colors far above us.

“Did you feel that?” Alistair was the first to voice a concern about what was happening beneath our feet. “It feels like the ground is moving. I say we get going now.”

Amy offered an emphatic head nod.

“I feel it too,” I said. “So, Jeremy, is it true what Ophanim just told us?”

“Yes... I know how to get out of here,” he said, pausing until a louder rumble passed. “Follow me!”

We moved back to where we first entered the cave, passing through the lovely gardens and the woods with resolute purpose. I noticed the panther from earlier, high up in another tree. With the ever increasing disturbances in the earth below, if it had any interest in pursuing us earlier, it had none now. In fact, all of the deer-like critters were absent, and other than a few birds that had returned, the area ahead of us was deserted.

“I think we should pick up the pace a bit,” I said, once we reached the meadow.

The ground around us was rising, and I saw cracks in the earth beneath the weird grass. At the same time, small explosions had begun along the stream near the wooded area. Looking over my shoulder, I saw deep orange patches where lava had surfaced from far below the earth. It was just a matter of time before the entire cave floor collapsed into a fiery abyss.

“On second thought, I believe we should skip the lollygagging and start running!”

“I think Pops is right!” said Alistair, anxiously looking around him. More cracks were forming in the ground. “Where is the exit that Ophanim referred to, Jeremy?”

“It’s just up ahead!” He pointed to a clump of trees just past the stone chute we took to get there. “The exit is beyond the trees... Look for the iron door!”

“*What?!* You’re saying this place can be accessed by a frigging *medieval* door?”

I couldn’t believe my ears, though it wasn’t an opportune time to question anything. Especially since another part of the cave floor fell away less than a hundred yards to our right. We wouldn’t have much longer to escape this place before the ground completely gave way beneath us.

“*Pops, stop it!*” Alistair shouted at me. “*Just run!!*”

The kid was right. Or, I should say the *old* kid still had it in him. He gave a hearty push to Amy and Jeremy, and we ran as fast as our legs could carry us to the trees while the earth around us began to give way in huge chunks. The door was there—just as Jeremy said it would be. Not quite medieval, which Alistair was quick to point out later on, once we were safe and sound again.

For a moment, I thought the heavy door might be locked, since it wouldn’t budge. But after Jeremy and I applied all of our might, with Alistair and Amy adding the final pushes to get it to move, we slipped into the passageway behind it.

A slight coolness greeted us, and it felt like a breeze moved through the tunnel—a noticeable contrast to the heated and now fiery world behind us. As we moved down the passageway, a massive crash announced that the entire cave floor behind us collapsed deep into the earth. The disruption almost landed us all on our asses. Keeping our feet became tenuous. If nothing else, the splashing lava behind us provided enough light to see where we were going...at least for a moment.

“How far do we have to go to get out of here?” Amy sounded fearful. New rumbles resounded under our feet, and a sudden turn in the tunnel left us in near darkness. “It can’t be that far away, can it?”

“I’m pretty sure we’re almost there,” said Jeremy, still leading the way.

Amy grabbed onto his shirt, and Alistair held onto her waist as they moved along. Me? I followed close behind, not near as freaked out by the lack of light. I remember chuckling to myself at how spoiled we’d become in modern society, as less than two hundred years ago, dim passageways were the norm. One had no choice but to develop skills to get around in such places.

“Pretty sure?!” retorted Amy. Her fear was escalating, made worse by the tremors in the passageway’s floor, as if it might buckle and collapse at any moment.

“Yes, we should reach the stairs that lead out of here in a moment,” said Jeremy. “They should be—*oww!*”

“*Oww what?!*” shrieked Amy.

She had finally reached her breaking point after all she had endured the past few days. Luckily for us all, the cry of pain came from Jeremy hitting his shin against the first step to freedom. Once we realized what had happened, we quickly lined up along the right wall and began our ascent up the spiral staircase in darkness. The earth continued to rumble below us, and for a few minutes, it did seem like we’d never make it to the earth’s surface. Especially when lava seeped through cracks in the floor far below us.

But then the staircase suddenly ended, and we stood in a circular room. Sunlight seeped in through weathered slats in the wooden door to the lone exit to the outside world. I’d never been inside this particular place, yet it seemed familiar.

“Well, what in the hell are we waiting for now?” said Alistair. His irritation was almost as dire as Amy’s. “Let’s get out of here!”

Without waiting, he led the way. The door opened easily. We stepped outside to full daylight. I’m sure it never felt sweeter to my boy and his gal pal. Jeremy seemed hesitant, however, like he never wanted to leave the one place in the entire world that everyone fantasizes about.

All of us recognized the main dirt road we stood upon, as we had returned to the heart of the ‘town with no name’. And as I turned to look behind me, the strange, upside-down flowerpot building began to crumble. It, along with the hillside’s unpretentious gate that also was disintegrating, would soon be dust and rubble. No doubt, if the debris were ever cleared away, there would no longer be a passage that led to the Garden of Eden.

It seemed sadly fitting that the only viable way to reach the most famous earthly paradise was no more.

Chapter 20

As we stood in that dusty little town, I considered all of the folly Alistair and I had gone through since this misguided venture began. Yes, there were the

treasures of new experiences to consider, and be thankful for. But, I felt incredibly disappointed that a prime opportunity to collect one of my prized coins would be forsaken. In my mind, I pictured the only resolution that made sense: we needed to return home to America before anything else got jacked up.

Granted, my son had forged a wonderful bond with a gorgeous young woman whose vivacious presence definitely added some spice to his world. The fact that he was getting older only added to the importance of such an enhancement... so this was good. Plus, we had rescued her brother, Jeremy, from his self-imposed solitude in the most glorious place on earth. Yeah, that was me being cynical again.

In all honesty, I believe Jeremy will adapt quickly enough, and rejoining his sister in America appears to be a very good thing. My gut tells me that they'll be fine.

So, it's just me with the sour grapes...the regret of still being on the lookout for my silver coin number twenty-two. And, I had no doubt that this failed opportunity would stick with me much longer than I'd like—largely because I will always know that one of my coins is buried in Al-hauron. Of course, I'm sure there is somebody out there who will put the positive, half-glass-full spin on this by saying the damned thing will still be there when I finally get a chance to come back to Iran.

“So, I wonder where Zoran, Gaspar, and Balthazar are?”

Amy shielded her eyes from the sun as she calmly asked this question, while looking in all directions. She's remarkably resilient, and appeared to have already made a strong recovery from her near-meltdown a short while earlier.

Nothing but dust and dried weeds rolling across the deserted road, the scene reminded me of the ghost towns in Midwestern America, where tumbleweeds and the whistling wind are all that remain of the 1800s gold and silver rushes. But unlike a sightseeing trip, we had two hungry people who hadn't had anything to drink or eat in nearly eight hours. I hadn't had anything since yesterday's breakfast, which isn't all that unusual for me. As for Jeremy, I couldn't tell. Something suggested to me that he might've been sustained for weeks or even months at a time by the life force flowing through the garden where he had hidden out for much of the past year.

“Maybe we should start walking back to Tehran, relying on our faith to manifest the mule-driven cart I saw yesterday,” I suggested, not immediately realizing the sarcastic context of my statement.

“Pops, you don't need to be such an ass about it!” Alistair moved over to Amy and affectionately rubbed her shoulder. “It will be dark soon, and I'd hate to have to camp out here in the Alborz wilderness without proper equipment, and without adequate food and supplies!”

Amy's frown supported my son's point of view. Only Jeremy seemed indifferent. I imagine he's had to make do on many occasions before, being the esteemed archaeologist that he is.

“Sorry, kiddo. I'll see if we can find a McDonalds so we can get you a 'happy meal',” I said, snickering wryly. He did have a point, since a glance at my wristwatch revealed the current local time in Tehran was 6:24 p.m. In about an hour, the evening sun would begin to slip behind the taller Alborz peaks. “In the

meantime, I think it's wisest not to hang out here waiting for a taxi to take us back to civilization."

I didn't wait for his response, turning my attention in the direction of the main road outside of town that would take us back to the highway. Not that I didn't trust Ophanim's advisement, but I held out hope that the Jeep would still be where we left it. Frankly, I was surprised that neither Amy nor Alistair had brought it up.

I heard Amy and Alistair grumbling behind me, which didn't surprise me. Hearing Jeremy voice a question about Alistair's and my real relationship did...at least a little. I expected the subject to come up at some point, and in truth, it was as good a time as any for Amy to fill him in on what she learned about me a few days earlier.

As we stepped through the gate that marked the town's main entrance, she was just finishing the tale about my true identity and I must say she delivered it with aplomb and enthusiasm. Some of her comments were accentuated with cynical exaggeration for my benefit, I'm sure. I admire the lady's spunk.

"So, you're Judas Iscariot?" Jeremy's tone bore a mixture of belief and suspicion. No doubt, the scientist within him pulled skeptically in one direction while the incredible world of angels and the Garden of Eden pulled him in another. "That would make you—"

"Two thousand and thirteen years, two months and twenty-three days young, to be exact," I said, pretty damned sure that my interruption was spot on. I looked over my shoulder to give him an impish look, since I doubted he'd readily understand the depth of my dry sense of humor just yet. That's when I noticed a dark vehicle speeding toward us from the other end of the village. "It looks like we've finally got some company."

Everyone else turned to look where I pointed. Indeed, it looked like a black sedan, and I could see the Mercedes emblem glistening in the fading sunlight.

"I hope whoever is coming will be friendly to us," said Amy, softly. She sounded worried again.

What she had gone through over the past few days would bring some tough moments for her. Despite her remarkable fortitude, no one goes through torture, especially the kind that is of a personal and sexual nature, and remains unscathed. I envisioned the same struggle for my son, despite his advanced age. Yet, for both, I prayed that the healing powers of the magical stream we had immersed ourselves in took care of more than physical ailments and injuries.

"I agree," said Jeremy, cupping his hands above his eyes to shield his vision from the sun's glare. "But something seems off about this..."

His words trailed off, and I heard a slight groan escape from Alistair. When I looked back toward the approaching car, all I could do was chuckle at the irony.

"It just figures," I said, shaking my head, disgusted and at the same time amused. "I do believe this is our ride back to the city."

Either Ophanim or the magi employed a rascally way of helping out. Before our very eyes, the beautiful black luxury vehicle somehow disappeared, and within the cloud of dust that pulled up in front of us was a beat-up old Volvo truck. I recognized the model from the late 1940s. The finish had long since peeled away, leaving traces of the original red pigment that back then might've glistened

beautifully under a late afternoon sun—perhaps an even match for the Mercedes mirage from a moment ago. The engine backfired as the truck idled tiredly.

“I understand you need a ride,” said Zoran, lightheartedly through the driver’s side window. The two men from earlier were sitting with him on the front bench seat. At least we were beyond playing language games. “Climb up in the back of the truck and we’ll be on our way!”

It literally took me biting my lip to keep from making another wisecrack. Trust me, the absurdity of our situation and our mode of transportation begged for it. But I urged the others to join me in the back after Zoran and Jeremy traded pleasantries for a couple of minutes. Following what we had experienced during the past twelve hours, no one else broached the subject of how the late model luxury car became a dilapidated grain delivery truck.

“What are these for, I wonder?” Amy pointed to four robes laid out across from the short hay bales placed in the back for us to sit on. “I’m guessing these are for us?”

“Yes,” said Jeremy, picking up a black one that came with a veil. “This one is for you, and the others are for Alistair, Judas, and me.”

He shot me a playful look, and I nodded in kind. Leave it to the young scholar to ignore my alias in favor of my real name. That could make things interesting, and I briefly worried it might get us into trouble someday. But, for now it seemed okay, since everyone traveling in the truck knew who I was—including the mysterious three *magi* riding in the cab.

Jeremy handed Alistair and me each a robe, being careful to follow some predetermined instructions as to who got what.

“Alistair is supposed to get the most colorful robe with the purple ghutra, since he is technically the oldest among us—an honorable achievement among the traditional Persian people,” Jeremy explained. “You, Judas, will wear the dark blue robe with the black ghutra. That leaves the white robe and red ghutra for me.”

Jeremy motioned for us all to get dressed quickly,

“Why are we doing this? It seems like such an extravagance for where we’re going.... Hey, where are we going?”

Alistair sounded panicked as he looked anxiously at both sides of the road we were on. I should’ve noticed we were heading deeper into the mountains instead of back to Tehran, but for some reason I completely missed this. Too distracted, I suppose, by the prospect of dressing in a full robe and ghutra. It would be the first time in, what, fifteen hundred years? Yeah, that would be about right, since I didn’t return to my homeland after the onset of the sixth century A.D. until the crusades were in full swing. Fashion throughout Europe and much of the *known world* was quite a bit different by then. It was especially for those of us with the means to dress *fashionably*.

“It’s a secret.” Jeremy placed his forefinger to his lips when his sister indignantly told him to ante up the answer.

“Is this what you and Zoran discussed?” I felt my body heat up a bit under the robe. Grateful the sun was nowhere near its highest point, I could tell my boy felt the same way. “I imagine Ophanim already knew about this change of plans, too, when he mentioned the magi would be coming for us.”

“So, we’re talking about ‘magi’ in the biblical sense?” Amy snickered. “Aren’t they the guys who brought gifts of jewels, frankincense, and myrrh when Jesus was born?”

“Yes, I believe that’s exactly what we have here,” said Alistair, looking over at Jeremy, who smiled and nodded.

“Oh, Christ, you’ve got to be *kidding* me!” said Amy. Apparently we had just reached the threshold of her bullshit meter. “So, these guys are like the *three wise men* we see in standard nativity depictions?”

“Do you really want to take a chance and insult them?” I interjected. “Regardless of their exact role in all of this, I do believe a bona fide angel counts as a reliable source. So, if Ophanim says they’re magi, then that’s who they are. I think the earlier question of ‘where the hell are we headed?’ is a better one to focus on.”

Yeah, that did get her to shut up. It also got me a wicked stare that would’ve ignited my garments and melted me into a puddle if she had Ophanim’s power. Her lovely green eyes were immediately transformed into narrow slits of Medusa fire. Luckily, Jeremy found another way to distract us all. He pulled out a small leather pouch that Zoran had given to him and poured its contents into his left palm.

“These things that look like black lima beans? They’re supposed to keep us nourished until we can find time to eat properly.” Jeremy smiled at us all, and gave an especially loving look to his sister, as if he knew her temperament under stress and hunger. “Zoran says you only need to eat a few of these to last until we make it back to Tehran.”

“Even though we’re headed in the opposite direction?”

Very nice Ali! He took the very words out of my mouth.

“Yes,” said Jeremy, eyeing my son thoughtfully for a moment. “Zoran promised it will make complete sense once we reach our destination, and that we’ll be back in Tehran by morning.”

We took the beans and swallowed them—without the aid of anything to drink, mind you. I didn’t feel anything at first, but again my metabolism isn’t normal. However, once I saw both Amy and Alistair relax, I knew we’d be okay. One weird side effect of the strange little beans was an apparent inability to keep track of time. Before I knew it, twilight was upon us. Then, just before the onset of night, the dilapidated old truck pulled into a very small village.

This village was significantly bigger than the last one we had been in, but without much that indicated its people even knew the world had moved into the twenty-first century. With rudimentary amenities at best, I knew we’d never find anything resembling a Howard Johnson’s. But it did have a church. One that I recognized from my previous painstaking research.

Al-haroun.

I couldn’t believe my eyes, and in the dimness I checked for other landmarks... the nearby mosque, and a marketplace across the street from it. This was indeed the right place—the place where a certain silver coin called to me. I felt an incredible wave of gratitude for whatever inspired Zoran and his cohorts to bring me here. Whether it was the angel Ophanim, or some providence from the Lord he serves, and Whom I have desperately sought reconciliation with.

But, it came with a bit of a problem, too. The village was crawling with soldiers, though Iranian instead of the mercenary type we had most recently dealt with.

“Since when did this place become part of a militarized zone?” Alistair’s tone was wary as he looked from one side of the road to the other. “I take it that you didn’t come across any information like this during your research, Pops?”

“No, son, I didn’t.” It was the truth. Somehow things had changed very recently, and seeing how many armed troops were in attendance dampened my enthusiasm. “But it’s too late to turn back now.”

More than likely that was indeed an accurate assessment. I now had a much better understanding of why the less-than-desirable mode of transportation had replaced the Mercedes, as well as why we were dressed in robes. Perhaps our nighttime arrival in the village that spawned the desire to come to Iran in the first place was also not by accident.

Zoran motioned for Jeremy to tell us to keep our heads down, just before the truck was accosted by a pair of soldiers. The pair spoke with Zoran, and I have to admit I was impressed with how fluently the magi leader spoke the modern Persian dialect the soldiers preferred. Apparently, the content of what he said was just as impressive, as we only garnered a cursory glance from either guard as they motioned for the truck to pass through.

Zoran drove down a street near the church, and I had the strange sensation that my coin’s mysterious ‘call’ pulled on him in the same manner it did for me. He pulled the vehicle into a deserted lot where a community center was burned down several years ago, and never rebuilt due to the populace’s fear it would happen again. The former building’s location was close enough to where the coin lay hidden to count as a veritable *cursed site*. Burnings, earthquakes, and even the tornado I mentioned at the outset of this story all claimed structures built upon this very site. Only the church and the mosque have been spared, although their constituents have suffered grievously over the centuries.

“Here is where we must leave you,” said Zoran, after he and his two comrades climbed out of the truck’s cab. “William Judas Barrow... What you seek is calling loudly, and like you, we’ve been listening to its voice.”

Gaspar and Balthazar nodded silently to confirm Zoran’s words.

“Listen with your heart and mind, so that you find it quickly,” Zoran continued, and then turned to face my companions. “All of you must be ready to leave at the first light of dawn. You will be protected only until then, and you must make it outside of the village. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?” I didn’t like the way that sounded.

Zoran studied me intently for a moment. His warm brown eyes appeared to turn slightly luminous under the glow from a solitary streetlight nearby.

“Otherwise, none of you will ever have to concern yourselves with going back to America,” he said, his tone suddenly low and solemn. “It is your destiny to survive... but only if you heed my instructions.”

To me, it sounded as if it should be an easy deal. After all, I knew the general area where the coin was resting. Someplace inside the church... or perhaps it was in the outbuildings. Maybe it lay hidden under the road itself. Or, it could be inside one of the ancient tombs lined in several rows behind the church.

At least we didn't have to contend with finding the right church, since there was just one Christian house of worship in the village. The soldiers seemed preoccupied with an area nearly half a mile away from the church and mosque, so that was good, too. But I realized that could change before morning—especially if someone called to report four strangers hanging around the church this late at night. At least we were clad in outfits that seemed more in line with the garb worn by the few people I noticed mulling around the village entrance.

Despite the gravity of Zoran's words, I offered the traditional hug and kiss, following Jeremy and Alistair's lead. Amy apparently knew enough of Middle Eastern customs to avoid Western awkwardness, simply bowing to the three men before they climbed back into the truck.

"Okay, everyone, since the outcome of this situation rests squarely upon my shoulders, I suggest you let me take the lead so that we get it taken care of as quickly and safely as possible," I said.

Once I got either a head nod or a 'yes' from everyone, I led the way over to the church. Dark enough to hide in the shadows, we soon reached the side entrance to the one story building. It was unlocked.

"Try to keep things quiet, and it shouldn't take long to get a feel for the general area where the coin is hidden." I kept my voice to a whisper. "It may be in here, or it might not be... I should know if this is the right place in the next few minutes."

I waited for Alistair to step inside the church since he was the last one in line, and then I closed the door behind him. Just before I did, I glanced back to where the truck had been. When Zoran had dropped us off, he cut the noisy engine. I expected to hear it restart and idle loudly again. I heard nothing, and thought the mysterious trio was waiting to make sure we made it to the church okay. But now I wasn't so sure what to think. The big ugly and loud Volvo truck had vanished from where it sat earlier.

I didn't share this information with the others, since I thought it might lead to some needless panic and a distraction that would make our expedition more difficult. I only wished we had a light, since once again we were in darkness. Yes, there was electricity in the building, since I found the light switch. Unfortunately, that would immediately give our presence away. What I wouldn't give for the small flashlights Cedric provided for us.

"Is this what you need?"

Jeremy produced a similar flashlight, after I openly lamented about the lack of having a suitable light source. He explained that Zoran had given it to him. This was starting to piss me off, since even though I think of my personal *coin hunting* as a game, I'm not so keen on anyone other than Alistair treating it the same way.

"Yes, it is... but this is not the right place," I said.

"Huh? Pops, we just got in here. How in the hell can you tell already?"

Really, Alistair should know me better by now. Unlike the casual jaunts we sometimes have taken to collect a coin, this time the added onus of three peoples' lives put some extra petrol in my tank. Everything was intensified as a result, including my already heightened sensitivity. The 'feel' for where the coin lay resting had been juiced seriously.

"You and everyone else here are just going to have to trust me, Ali," I told him. "It's got to be inside one of the buildings outside... that's what I'm picking up."

Without waiting for any more questions, I prepared to lead the way back outside. I almost caused everyone to trip on their robes behind me. A handful of soldiers had gathered across the street from the church.

“*Well, fuck me running!*” I hissed angrily.

“What in the hell now, Pops?”

“*Shush!!!*”

This latest chapter in our misadventure just got a helluva lot worse. But we didn’t have the option of waiting. I knew it as much as I knew anything else at that moment. More soldiers would come, and it was a matter of time before someone carrying a loaded assault rifle ventured over to us.

“Why are these guys everywhere?”

Amy’s question would’ve been a great one to ask Zoran a short while ago, and it certainly wasn’t her fault. None of the guys thought to ask it either.

“I wish to God I had been smart enough to find out,” I said, quietly. “But now that we know they’re here, we will have to get to my coin *very* soon!”

I motioned for everyone to follow me outside. After closing the door carefully, I whispered for them to stay low to the ground, moving catlike to the rear of the church. The call from the coin grew stronger... we were on the right track. But it wasn’t inside the outbuildings, as the feeling grew weaker as I approached either one. A good thing in a sense, as both doors were bolted shut.

At this point, I told everyone else to wait in the shadows beneath one of the main church building’s eaves. I knew what I had to do next would be extremely risky, but three more soldiers had joined their comrades across the street. Logic told me that we’d be discovered within the next half hour if we didn’t find the damned coin first. I had no choice but to move out in plain sight.

I must have looked like such a lunatic, dodging back and forth between the rows of sepulchers, each one’s bleached cover glistening under the glow of another streetlamp near the end of this graveyard. The coin began to call loudly about halfway through the middle of the second row. The sensation sent small shockwaves through my left arm. My prize was somewhere inside the tomb next to where I crouched.

I waved covertly for the others to join me, but at first they didn’t see me. While I waited, a pair of soldiers crossed the street to the church. I thought surely they saw me, and I felt a thick lump form inside my throat. But they headed to the front of the building instead. Luckily, Amy noticed my desperate signal by then. The three of them crept over to me.

“It’s here!” I whispered excitedly, once all three rejoined me. “We’ve just got to bust into this thing.”

“What, and bring the entire Iranian brigade over here?!” Alistair snapped. “Isn’t there a latch on these things that we can use instead?”

“No, there’s not.”

“Your father’s right,” said Jeremy. “These tombs can only be entered by breaking what amounts to a plaster door in the front, and then we should be able to climb down into the main chamber... Are you sure what you’re looking for is in there?”

"I'm reasonably certain," I said. "If I had to bet all the money I have to my name, I'd say 'yes'. But I'll admit I'm a little nervous breaking into this thing with so much unwanted company around."

I dared to peek over the top of the tomb, and my hunch that the area would soon be visited by more soldiers proved correct. Worse yet, the two we saw from earlier were checking the locked doors to the out buildings. I worried that we had left some evidence of our presence... Did I not get the side door to latch fully?

"Oh *shit!* They're coming this way!" Amy pointed across the street where five other soldiers moved toward the other two.

I had hoped we'd benefit from local superstitions about walking among the dead at night, but there is always courage in numbers. If these guys decided to venture out into the tombs, we'd be screwed. Unpleasant visions of spending the next few years in a primitive Iranian prison flashed before my eyes, and I seriously debated on finding an escape route and kissing my coin search goodbye.

Before I could make that decision, a sharp thud resounded next to me. Jeremy had kicked a hole through the door to the tomb. I almost berated him for acting so impulsively, but then I saw the placement of the hole was near the bottom of the door, and just large enough for all of us to crawl through it.

"I used to be a kick-boxer in college," he said. "I hope you're right about this."

"I just hope our asses don't end up in prison!" Amy's rebuke was directed more at her brother than anyone else. However, the focus of her ire was about to change.

"Jeremy, since you know the general outlay of a tomb like this, either you or I should go first," I advised. "Amy should be next, followed by Ali, and then whoever is left between you and me."

Jeremy nodded his approval, and before we could decide if it was him or me, he dove head first into the hole.

"You're next, little lady," I told Amy.

Meanwhile, excited voices were moving into the tombs, and several flashlight beams scanned the area. Our presence would be uncovered in a moment.

"I-I don't know," she said, after a small lizard scurried near the dark hole.

"*We don't have time to debate this!*" I warned her, whispering harshly. "*You need to get your ass in there!!*"

"Amy, grab my hand and I'll guide you!" said Jeremy.

Well at least that was mostly taken care of. But I heard more voices... getting closer. I pushed her feet in as she moved into the hole, uttering a slight yelp in response.

Shit, they're going to find us for sure!

Alistair was next, but after he saw a pair of soldiers jogging toward our area he dove into the hole, leaving me as the only one still outside the tomb. I really didn't know if I'd make it in time, but I climbed in after him, seeing a slight glow from the flashlights on the ground behind my feet.

I fell into the fetid musty cell, thinking I'd land in the depository and share whatever foulness was in there. But Jeremy caught me and set me down quietly while we watched several pairs of black booted feet move past the hole. If any of these guys stooped down and took a look inside the tomb they might have immediately seen us, even though we ducked down as far as we possibly could.

Both Alistair and Amy were fighting the urge to retch, and I prayed they could keep it all inside until the danger passed. It wouldn't be easy, as it seemed someone had left a fairly new corpse in this crypt.

"It's pretty ripe in here," Alistair commented, keeping his voice to a whisper when the boots disappeared from beside the tomb entrance. "I imagine this place can become a damned furnace when the noonday sun hits the roof of the tomb just right."

"Yeah, and to think there might be fifty to a hundred people buried in here with whoever that stench is coming from," I added, snickering slightly when Amy suddenly danced where she stood. She was determined to make sure her feet and the bottom of her robe didn't get entangled with the bones and rotted clothing of the additional dead I mentioned. "Hell we might be standing in the very depository itself!"

"That's enough, Pops!" Alistair let his voice rise back to an angry hiss that drew Jeremy's ire. "Don't you have a coin to be looking for?"

Why yes, my dear boy, I certainly do!

The soldiers had stepped away, but their voices confirmed they remained in the immediate area as they continued their exploration of the graveyard. A disastrous development, if we needed the flashlight to help me pin down the exact location for the coin I sought. But the light wasn't necessary... not even a little.

"I see the glow. It's in the back left corner of the tomb."

"What glow?" said Amy.

"It's something only he can see," Alistair told her. "From here on out we'll be spectators unless he needs our help clear away debris."

Especially in darkness, the bluish glow will stand out for me, like the LED numerals from a standard digital alarm clock. And although this one was a little faint, I had no doubt the coin was there. It didn't seem as if it would take much to recover my prize, and then be on our way.

Once I reached the corner I did encounter one slight problem... well, maybe a pretty big problem in a sense. A pile of decaying corpses had been piled up to my neck. The glow came from deep within this pile, which meant the silver shekel was beneath at least several of these skeletons.

Good thing neither Amy nor Alistair had been chosen for this assignment, eh?

All kidding aside, I had dealt with far worse circumstances in the past when looking for my coins—though this was definitely the first *family* sepulcher I had ever visited inside. I suppose we could've waited for me to try and recover the coin, perhaps aided by the eventual dawn's light.

But something told me to grab it right then... before the unearthly cobalt glimmer dissipated. Lord knew, this excursion could be so much worse if I had to reach blindly through several corpses to locate my treasure.

I whispered for Alistair to come help me lift the bodies off the pile. At the same time, our soldier buddies resumed their patrol of the immediate area. I saw several flashlight beams pass within a foot of the gaping hole in the middle of the tomb's plaster door. I felt compelled to get the silver sucker out from its hiding place as quickly as possible, based on the current vigil going on outside the tomb. Extracting the coin without making any noise would probably be impossible. However, moving the decayed bodies out of the way first would ensure less noise.

So that's what we did, and before long Jeremy and Amy joined in taking turns in lifting and moving the pile out of the way. I guess one could say it was like dismantling a pile of kindling wood, since the dried and leathery remains were a lot like sticks—especially when the leg and arm bones separated from a torso. I was especially impressed with Amy, since I knew she had never done anything like this before. My boy and Jeremy may not have relished this sort of thing any more than I did, but they moved quickly and quietly with nary a grimace.

It was a great way to pass the time as we quietly switched places while dismantling the pile. We never created a disturbance loud enough to reveal our presence to the handful of soldiers hanging out in the Al-haroun bone yard.

Finally, sometime after midnight I was able to reach in under the bare skeleton of a young child and grab the shekel. A mummified withered hand gripped it tightly, as if its owner once understood the coin's tremendous worth and was determined to try and take it along into the afterlife.

"It's the right size and shape, Pops," whispered Alistair. He admired it as I held it up high enough to catch the light rays from one of the soldiers' lantern resting against the tomb across from the one we occupied. "It looks like the real deal."

Holding one of my coins always brings me the same sensation. One of healing at first that is always followed by a painful remembrance of what the entire collection of coins means. Once the sensation of wholeness wanes, it gives way to terrible memories of seeing Jesus of Nazareth beaten and then crucified—all on account of my betrayal. I can still smell the blood and sweat that flowed off his body, as well as feel the terror and see his anguished eyes that knew exactly where to find me in the crowd demanding his torture and execution.

"Yes, I believe it is authentic," I said, trying to enjoy a light chuckle about the irony of my becoming a late-century connoisseur for items attached to my own sordid history.

The glow had largely dissipated, and an odd mixture of elation and regret remained. Although the elation that comes with a new coin discovery is the same, the regret washing over me hurts a little bit worse. So why do I do it? Why do I avidly search for the very things that cause me such heartache? Just one reason: to get to the end and see if it's enough to buy me a ticket into eternal paradise.

I showed my trophy to Amy and Jeremy, who seemed only mildly impressed. I suppose a silver shekel that was common coinage back in Roman times doesn't quite compete with a hundred foot crystal tree. Rather than waste any more time doing the show and tell party, I carefully deposited the coin into my pants pocket.

"Now... we need to get the hell out of here and back to Tehran." I moved back to the hole in the mausoleum door.

From what I could tell, the soldiers had settled in. It appeared that two more had ventured into the area. Maybe they weren't looking for anybody after all. They seemed content, and I detected the odor of liquor. It reminded me of *haoma*, but stronger than the drink of choice for those who still practice Zoroastrianism.

"*Shit!* I don't think these guys are going anywhere soon," I said, angrily. It would be nearly impossible to leave unless the soldiers moved on. Maybe a few more hours would make a difference. "Let's just be ready to climb out of here quickly when the opportunity to leave presents itself."

“I think we should bring Amy and Ali up front. so we can get them out first,” suggested Jeremy.

In the faint glow from the nearby lantern, the expression on his face was one of determination. Very good. As long as he and I were on the same page in clearing everyone out of this cramped tomb, we’d increase our chances of escaping Alharoun unscathed.

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Jeremy,” I told him, motioning for Amy and Alistair to move up close to us. “Now, we’ll just wait...”

My words trailed off as I heard a commotion from across the street. Heavy footsteps followed the sound, along with several automobile door slams. The footsteps were getting closer... *running* toward us!

“What in the hell do you think is going on out there?” said Alistair, competing with Jeremy and me to steal a peek.

“*Everybody duck down as low as you can!*” I whispered forcefully, trying to add enough *umph!* to match the growing feeling of dread washing over me. We were about to be discovered—that’s what my gut told me. “*Stay as low as you can and don’t make a frigging sound!*”

We all crouched down low, to the point the tomb’s collective stench from filth, rotting flesh, and stale dust filled our nostrils. The approaching footsteps slowed when they neared our hideout. I held out hope that we might go unnoticed once more. But then several high-powered halogen flashlights were shoved in through the door hole that Jeremy had created.

The light obliterated the darkness inside the tomb. It clearly revealed everything, including the mass of ancient bones in the depository behind us and the newer corpses and loose body parts on the tomb’s floor around us. I knew what to expect and not be overly surprised. Jeremy gasped only slightly. Alistair probably knew what was in here alongside him in the darkness, but couldn’t hide his surprise when a corpse with its gaping mouth laid open was less than six inches from his face. Still, his gasp was nowhere near as shrill as Amy’s—not that I’m picking on the lone female in our group. Lord knows she had already impressed me with her courageous determination to rescue her brother.

As unprepared as we were for what just happened, we were even less prepared for what came next.

“William? What in the hell’s going on in there?!”

Chapter 21

To be fair, my friend Agent Sam Daniels from the CIA should be credited with our rescue. At least, he should get most of the credit for actually showing up in Alharoun. The rest of the accolades should go to whoever placed a call to the Embassy of Switzerland and told them exactly where to find us in the wee hours that Thursday morning.

It wouldn’t surprise me if Zoran was the one who called. It does surprise me how this cat seems to be everywhere and nowhere all of the time.

Sam Daniels was a Georgia State Trooper for nearly fifteen years before moving on to America's Central Intelligence Agency. I've often wondered if all that time spent chasing speeding cars and arresting drunken miscreants is what siphoned his sense of humor. He's all business. Handsome in a traditional marine buzz-cut sort of way, his hazel-eyed stare and angry square jaw can kill a joke fest faster than a bad amateur comic at a stand-up club.

A slight grunt was all Sam had to say after Amy and Alistair added their gratitude to the sincere *thank you* from Jeremy. I already knew better than to say anything, though I'm sure he duly noted my sheepish smirk. His eyebrows were raised ever so slightly as he eyed me with irritation that was almost fatherly. Honestly, that kind of thing rolls right off my shoulders easily, as it does from all of my colleagues. In a few years I'll have to *disappear* anyway, and if my kid and I fail to find the last eight coins in the next ten to twenty years, I can still check up on old Sam and the gang in their retirement years from afar.

Anyway, right after we climbed out from the tomb we were quickly ushered to a black limousine parked near the spot we last saw Zoran's ancient Volvo. From there, we sped past the soldiers lined up all along Al-haroun's main streets, and we were soon back on the highway. Our driver must've been given strict orders to get us the hell out of the mountains as quickly as possible, and both Alistair and Amy clung to the door handles with white-knuckle tenacity until we reached the suburban sprawl of Tehran.

"So, I take it that we're not going back to the Ferdowsi Hotel," I said to Sam, when the limousine raced past the exit that would've taken us back to a warm shower and something more substantial than a nutritional bar to eat.

"Yep, that's correct." His Georgian drawl was genteel, like a rich southern aristocrat about to broach the subject of crude oil futures. "We're all heading home to the States tonight."

"What about our bags in storage at the hotel?" Alistair sounded deeply worried. "I've got an expensive laptop that won't survive standard air shipment back to the USA!"

"Your things are already on the plane," said Sam, grinning slightly. "Cedric had that arranged yesterday, even though some of us didn't think ya'll would survive and come back to claim them." His grin widened to a wicked smile—dude is a lot more handsome when you can get him to do that.

"My bags too?" Amy eyed Sam suspiciously. I've come to understand it takes her a moment to warm up to others.

"Yes," said Sam. "Yours and William's luggage are there as well."

"Well, all right," I said, and then asked a question I'd been thinking about since our rescue. "Any ideas on why there were a ton of soldiers prowling around Al-haroun?"

"No more of an idea than why in the hell you four were digging around in a burial pit!"

Ouch and touché! I sure as hell didn't want to say anything about our coin search, and immediately prayed that Al-haroun would soon be as good as forgotten. I quickly sought to change the subject.

"I suppose we won't be taking the same flight path back home that we took to get here. Correct?"

“Do you even need to ask that?” Sam smirked, and then glanced over his shoulder toward the driver.

He sat next to Jeremy as they faced the rear of the car, and Amy, Alistair, and I sat across from them facing the front. A small table sat between us, and this limo came with a double bar. A stiff drink sounded wonderful. But I decided to wait until we were thirty-five thousand feet above the ground before indulging myself. Especially since no one else seemed interested in joining me at this point.

“No, I suppose not,” I agreed. “Dulles via Frankfurt would be the most logical path, I’m sure, unless Amsterdam is the transfer point.”

“Amsterdam it is, this time. But we’ll be there less than an hour and then carry on to Washington.”

And that was where the small talk ended. It wasn’t awkward for me, and I’m not sure how it was for the others. But no one in the car said anything else until we arrived at Khomeini International Airport. Actually, we conversed no more until after we boarded one of the private Boeing jets the CIA keeps handy for when things go awry, and there’s an urgent need to get someone out of trouble and safely home.

In this case, I guess a botched surveillance trip and failure to secure information on the Russians’ progress with FGR technology would count as such a need.

“William! So glad you could make it, my man!”

Cedric Tomlinson’s warm greeting reverberated throughout the first-class compartment. I guess it truly would’ve been first class if it didn’t contain a hospital bed for him and enough room for his two attendants, or nurses. They immediately moved to his heavily bandaged side when he grimaced after his celebratory welcome to me. The ‘nurses’ were two young blondes who just happened to look like high-class strippers, or the kind of female fodder once prevalent in eighties rock n’ roll videos. Cedric’s preferred decade.

The flight home promised to be intriguing if not a helluva lot of fun! At least Alistair and Amy could give Cedric a hard time for his antics instead of picking on me for a change.

“It’s okay, it’s okay ladies,” said Cedric, playfully shooing the girls away from his side. He buttoned up his shirt past the bandage line and covered up his legs with a blanket, as if suddenly aware he was half-naked. “Sam, show everybody to their seats, and we’ll get this big bad bird up in the air!”

Cedric motioned for Sam and me to sit in two luxury seats close to him, and for Jeremy, Amy, and Alistair to choose from several other seats in the section. Alistair chose a window seat not far from my seat after reclaiming his carry-on bag and his laptop, while Amy and Jeremy took seats together across from him.

Once we were safely in the air and speeding toward Amsterdam, I agreed to join Cedric in having a cocktail. A dry martini for me, and a pina colada for him since he really wasn’t supposed to indulge in anything other than milk or water at this point. His recovery was borderline miraculous for a normal human, and knowing his incredible tolerance for liquor was the only reason I didn’t turn motherly on him.

Meanwhile, Sam fidgeted impatiently in his seat. There was something urgent he wanted to discuss. I must admit it brings a little joy to my life watching Sammy squirm a little and have to kiss up to Cedric—his direct superior in the agency.

Finally, after feigning he had no idea what Sam was agitated about, Cedric asked for one of his ‘assistants’ to bring his laptop over to his bedside. He then asked Sam and me to join him there.

“So, William, did ya’ll ever think about the cameras—especially the ones in your wristwatches—when you were down in that amazing cavern?”

“To be honest, no,” I said, surprised that this was the first question presented to me. I looked down at my wristwatch, feeling foolish that I entirely forgot about the camera feature in the upper right hand side of the clock face. “The smaller hidden cameras became history on Sunday, when my dad and Amy were captured by Petr Stanislav. But I forgot all about the cameras you mentioned in our wristwatches.”

“I thought that might happen,” said Cedric, wearing the elfin expression I’ve learned to admire and loathe over the years. “That’s why I had them calibrated so we could turn them on remotely.”

“*What?!*”

That was Alistair’s response, as apparently he was listening in on our conversation. Amy and Jeremy might have been oblivious, since it seemed they were catching up on lost time, but they were paying attention now.

“Well, shit,” Cedric sighed. His eyes remained playful. “Come on over girls and boys, since we might as well let all of you see what we’ve been looking at. Plus, it will give me a chance to formally meet Mr. Jeremy Golden Eagle.”

He motioned for everyone—including his latest girlfriends—to come on over. Sam looked mortified in response to this development, until Cedric reminded him that, in our closed confines, it would be damned near impossible to keep anything discussed on the aircraft a secret from non-agency personnel within earshot. When Agent Daniels continued to protest, Cedric suggested waiting to show or discuss anything until after Michael Lavoie viewed the same footage with his general staff in Washington.

It came as no surprise to me that ole Sammy didn’t want to miss out on being the first to share and discuss what our cameras apparently captured. Especially, since if we waited, he might not get an invitation to that party. I guess toeing the company line only goes so far.

After briefly speaking with Jeremy, Cedric pulled up video footage from all three of our wristwatch cameras on his laptop. Each camera was given a dedicated square on the screen.

“Now, I won’t spend any time on the FGR pictures we picked up from your cameras this past weekend—which were exactly what we needed. I personally thank you for that, Alistair and Amy,” he said. “And actually, I won’t spend much time on the fantastic imagery of what can only be the ‘Tree of Life’ from this past afternoon. What we *do* have questions on are two things captured by your cameras a little later on.”

Cedric fast-forwarded the images from all three of our wristwatches for a few minutes, until the dim images from being underground suddenly gave way to brilliant and colorful light.

“The pictures are amazing, and I goddamn guarantee that very few people have ever seen anything quite like this shit!” Cedric paused to make sure we were all with him. Everyone’s eyes were locked onto the crystal tree’s brilliance captured on his laptop screen. He fast-forwarded through more images. “Again, we don’t need to review the Soviets’ invasion into the cave, and the ensuing confrontation between you and them... However, there is something blurred that shows up at several points. Check this out.”

Cedric ran the camera images at normal speed again. Thankfully, none of us—not Alistair, Amy, Jeremy, or I—made a sound of any kind. But I sweated it out, anxiously hoping Cedric or Sam would insist on moving on from the blurred images of Ophanim that somehow had become indiscernible. Obviously, the angel didn’t want its likeness known, and the power of Ophanim’s reach extended far beyond the sacred oil poured upon our heads. In all likelihood, other than the Magi we met, Amy, Jeremy, Alistair and I were the only living souls to ever see this angel and survive long enough to talk about it to the outside world.

“Did any of you see what this thing was?”

Cedric looked at us all, his eyes scanning each of our faces for the truth.

“No... we didn’t see anything,” said Amy. My respect ratcheted up several notches on that one—deceit nicely done.

“William? Alistair?”

We shook our heads *no*, as did Jeremy.

“All right,” said Cedric, after exchanging disappointed looks with Sam. “Here’s the second thing that came up. This time the image only comes from one camera... William’s.”

Sam eyed me thoughtfully while we all kept an eye on the box containing my camera’s images. At first, I saw nothing. But as we were running for our lives when the cave floor began to crumble, the lens on my wristwatch’s camera caught something. Something unexpected, or better, *someone*.

A shadowed human form walked through the fiery ground, dragging another human form that was much bigger than it.

This is where my intuitions come in handy, or drive me crazy. If I’m right, then my reputation for being able to figure out complex problems quickly remains intact. If I’m wrong... well I’m always hopeful that won’t happen.

First, I determined the identity of the bigger form, or body, being dragged. None of the mercenaries or scientists carried that stature. Just one man... Petr Stanislav.

But I saw his lifeless body lying in a pool of blood on the cave floor near the stream. Likely he was still dead... Even so, who was the mysterious figure trying to move the man’s enormous frame inside the fiery cave?

“Here’s one last image of this guy, and it looks like he turned around to watch ya’ll leave,” Cedric advised, pointing to the mysterious figure in motion. “Maybe if I enlarge this last part a little, it will help.”

He ran the images forward, slower this time and maximized the square to where it filled the entire screen. I may not have gasped, but the images that followed utterly surprised me. As the figure turned toward us, I noticed something glowing within the individual’s chest.

Viktor Kaslow??! No frigging way!!

It looked like this person had blonde hair and blue eyes, too... yet I watched Viktor's spirit leave his body. However, I recalled how the glowing crystal shard that pierced his heart was still glowing when I found him as he lay dying.

It did make sense, although it also made no sense.

"See what I told you, Sam?" said Cedric, smiling wryly. "I believe William thinks it's the same guy I do."

"What guy?" Alistair looked over at me suspiciously, as if I just gave Cedric some subtle clue to confirm his implied theory. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Well, before we make a rash rush to judgment, let me show you the satellite images that Michael sent to me a few hours ago," said Cedric, without looking up from his laptop. "Watch the images as they get magnified."

I'll admit, the images picked up literally hundreds and even thousands of miles away fascinate me to no end, whether it is the Hubble Space Telescope or the satellite lenses aimed at a Taliban hideout. And in this case, the view worked its way down from Asia Minor to Iran, to the Caspian Sea area, and down into the Alborz Mountains.

Before long, the mountain near Zoran's village with the ancient gate carved in its side appeared. For a moment, the view ceased to move... but then it began to magnify the gate.

Suddenly, the area next to the gate began to disintegrate, and an enormous hole opened up in the mountain. The magnification continued to pull us closer as glistening gem veins in the exposed mountainside appeared. Then the nose belonging to one of the FGR devices peered out through the wound.

I believe all of us who had just visited the cavern were stunned, even if nothing else happened. Obviously, someone survived. One of the Russian miscreants hadn't died after all.

"Okay, now watch this last part, and tell me what you see," said Cedric.

At first, the figure remained vague. But as the images became increasingly clearer, one could readily discern the preferred clothing and boots of one particular Soviet. Then, we were able to see the hair, skin color, and familiar stride the individual walked with. Even from where we stood at that moment, it was easy to perceive the man's anger, irritation, and malice.

I didn't need to see any more of this shit to determine that Viktor Kaslow had miraculously come back to life. I'd be a monkey's uncle for sure if I didn't know it by now. Yet, Viktor merely being alive still wasn't the issue. There are plenty of creeps like Petr Stanislav in the world. However, there are remarkably few human beings who consistently demonstrate a propensity for ill will to *all* mankind. And such a man is this one.

This was very bad news.

Something exceedingly evil and unlikeable had suddenly become un-killable.

Welcome to immortality, Viktor Kaslow.

Chapter 22

Compared to the revelation that Viktor Kaslow had just joined a unique society that only numbers a few hundred souls—at least by my count these past few centuries—the rest of the plane trip home was largely uneventful.

The jet didn't come with the incredible amenities featured on the Emirates aircraft we were fortunate to have for the flight to Tehran, but it did have a full bath and shower. After getting cleaned up, Amy and Alistair desired sleep and lots of it. Especially on the trip from Amsterdam to D.C., where they both slept nearly the entire time.

Yes, there were still moments of camaraderie. When awake, Alistair and Amy's budding friendship looked to be a lasting thing. And even Jeremy and I shared several 'quiet' discussions about angels and what I knew previously about immortality. I told him that he could call me 'Judas' anytime, so long as it was done half-jokingly to where my colleagues at the CIA remained unaware of my true identity.

Sam and Cedric avoided extended interactions with any of us after getting meager answers to their earlier questions. They seemed content from that point on to wait on Michael's assistance—which would come in my debriefing in a couple of days. Of course, Cedric had his female distractions, which grew somewhat annoying to me, and thoroughly irritating to Sam. Cedric's philandering wasn't as noticeable on the trip to Tehran. A combination of a more spacious aircraft and shorter flight contributed to that, I'm sure. But, I think if he had offered to share one of the girls with Sammy, there might've been less friction between them.

After we made it home to Washington, and prepared to gather our luggage in the Dulles baggage claim, Amy approached me. Sam and Cedric had already advised us on the necessary security measures we all needed to adhere to, and then they left to meet with Michael.

"I just want to tell you that I really am glad I met you, and I hope you'll forgive me for not always being so brave when we were in trouble," said Amy. "Someday, I hope to be more like you."

No you don't little sister—not ever.

"You are *very* brave," I told her. "You were the bravest one back there—always, and do you know why? It's because you faced your fears and moved past them for yours and the greater good of us all. You showed more courage than I ever have."

Unlike my puckish tendencies, this time, I made sure my smile was warm. It should've come across as genuine, because I honestly meant what I said to her.

"But, you're the bravest man—other than my brother—that I've ever known!" she insisted. "You're—"

"Immortal," I interrupted her. "I will always survive and heal, so pain for me is a temporary thing. My perspective is one that's so different from yours. You risked life and limb without any assurance things would work out. It's the very definition of being brave in my book."

She blushed and didn't know how to respond. Luckily, she didn't flinch when I approached her, allowing me to give her a warm hug.

"I thank you for what you've done for Alistair," I said, as I stepped back from her. Jeremy and my son were on their way over to us, their luggage in hand. "Like you, he's a brave one, and a better man than his father. I hope you two stay in touch."

I started to choke up, but it went unnoticed. I've become extraordinarily adept at hiding what I feel when I deem it necessary to do so.

"Oh, we've already become fast friends!" she beamed, and looked over at my boy and gave him a smile that only the closest of friends and lovers ever see. "In fact, we have a dinner date for next weekend!"

"Luigis—best pizza in the D.C. area!" said Alistair.

"Sounds like fun!" I then reached out to shake hands with Jeremy. He gripped my hand and held it for a moment. "I've enjoyed our talks, Jeremy!"

"Me too... Judas!"

Ah, such impishness that so reminds me of... *me!*

For the time being, we parted ways—Amy and Jeremy hailing a taxi to take them to their parents' estate in Arlington, and me and Alistair picking up his Honda from long-term parking.

On the way to dropping me off at my townhouse, Alistair and I talked briefly about our trip... the good times and our near death experiences. We always hold a little celebration when we collect a coin, and decided to do that around 2:00 p.m. the next afternoon, Saturday. It was already going on eight o'clock that Friday night, and even I felt a bit tired. I could only imagine how exhausted Alistair felt, though he did sleep quite a bit on the way home. But jet lag always takes its toll with him—especially whenever we return home from a foreign land. Even so, he refused my offer to drive him home first and return his automobile in the morning.

You might think I reside in a palace fit for a king. I have done that—lived the life of extravagance before. But as I get older—or, rather, as I take on more years of experience on the great planet earth, I find I need less and less in terms of material comforts.

So where I live right now isn't far from both the Smithsonian Institute and Alistair. I love the convenience, and I love even more the fact I'm generally left alone. It's not a crime-infested area, but it is a place that allows me to come and go almost unnoticed. That comes in handy for numerous reasons, not the least is the fact I don't have to worry about my neighbors noticing that I never age. I could live here for thirty to forty years if the secret about my real identity holds up.

My only niggle about any residence is when my CIA cohorts show up. I would hate to be recognized by any of the international enemies I've made in the past twenty years. Yes, they follow us just like we follow them, so this is not an idle concern.

After letting myself into my home, I took a moment to feed my pet cactus that I call Fred, before settling in for the night. With the lights on low, and my Mozart collection reverberating softly throughout the main level, I stared out my living room window toward the D.C. skyline. I held the latest coin again, allowing the now faint memories of what happened so long ago torture me for a while. Fine Scotch on the rocks takes a little off the edge. But until I grew weary enough to sleep a few hours, I continued to twirl the shekel. I admired equally the exquisite honker on Caesar's face and the proud eagle that the country I have since adopted embraces as the ultimate symbol of freedom...and of peace.

* * * * *

"You're early Pops!"

Alistair almost sounded perturbed, but a playful glint danced in his eyes as he opened his door to me. He really does seem younger, and I happened to notice that the ligature marks around his neck had totally disappeared. In less than two days, no less! Pleasantly surprised that the Tree of Life's power had extended longer than I believed possible, I told him that he looked fantastic.

"Well, I do feel a helluva lot better than I have in years," he said, smiling slyly after first eyeing me suspiciously. I guess years of playful zingers have made it hard to tell a dig from a sincere compliment from me. "Come on in and make yourself at home in the living room!"

He sounded happy, and I noticed a spring in his step. Could this mean more than a dip in the stream that was enhanced by the Tree of Life? Could it be deep fondness for a certain female? Far too early to broach the subject, I didn't want to jinx what is meant to be or not meant to be by bringing it up.

"I've got your Dewar's ready for you, so all you'll need is a glass and some ice, right?"

Alistair followed me into the living room as he said this. Everything was set up for our little ceremony, including the long mahogany case that lay open on the coffee table. Twenty-one silver coins were on display, with nine open slots left to be filled. We used to keep the case's contents in one of the city's leading industrial banks' safety deposit boxes. But once the number of silver coins climbed past fifteen, Alistair wisely suggested we keep the coins somewhere less conspicuous. So, I purchased a heavy duty safe to keep them secure and then had a small alcove added to the waiting area outside Alistair's master bedroom, where the safe sits bolted to the floor.

Not that I worry too much about anyone stealing our cursed coins. A fate far worse than what befell Ivan Sutter from Missoula Montana could well await anyone foolish enough to try.

"I see you've also brought out your blue label Jack Daniels," I said, alluding to the sealed bottle next to my preferred Dewar's. "Would you like for me to pour you a glass of it and bring it on over to you?"

"That would be great, Pops, and remember I take it straight up!"

"Will do, son!"

After I poured our drinks, I brought them over to the table. I handed to Alistair his Jack Daniels, and then pulled out the latest coin from my pocket.

"Would you like to do the honors this time, or should I?" I said.

"You set the coin in its space, and then I'll offer the eulogy for it, since there's now one less to go!" He chuckled warmly. This was indeed a more joyous occasion than our most recent celebrations.

"Sounds like the best plan." I chuckled as well while placing my coin in the slot marked 'Twenty-two'. "Now let's hear what sweet words you have to say this time, Ali."

"Ah-hem..." he began, clearing his throat. "Here lies silver shekel number twenty-two, left in a decrepit grave hidden from view. Now there are just eight coins left for redemption. I pray for a kinder fate, to find them quickly, and hasten for your soul heaven's exemption."

“Not bad, son... not bad at all.” I was impressed with what he made up on the fly and the sincere tenderness of his delivery. “We’re getting closer to the end of this crazy journey.”

Alistair’s eyes grew misty, and so I looked away to avoid the same thing happening to me. I caught a glimpse of something glowing brightly inside the carry-on bag he had yet to unpack, resting beside the sofa.

“What’s this?” I stepped over to it. In truth, I already knew what I’d find there. “I should’ve known you’d be up to some shenanigans in the Garden of Eden!”

“Pops, before you overreact to this, I want you to consider two things,” said Alistair, as he sought to intercept me. Unfortunately for him, I made it to the small duffle bag before he did. “First, Amy and Jeremy took some crystals, too.”

“So that’s supposed to make it right, I take it?”

“No...but here’s the second thing: I’m continuing to feel better since I pocketed a handful of smaller shards Thursday,” he said.

He grinned sheepishly. This was probably in response to the playful scowl I wore.

“You mean, you’re feeling younger, right?”

“Yeah, that’s correct.”

“Well, just keep em’ to yourself and *don’t* take any of them with you to Georgetown for ‘show and tell’ this fall!”

“What?! And risk losing my ‘fountain of youth’ to some rich kid whose just beginning to figure out the trouble his wee-wee can get him into? You should know me a helluva lot better than that!”

“I do.” I reached inside the bag and picked up three of the pinky-sized shards. These were murkier than the ones I saw land near us in the cave. Alistair must’ve picked these up from somewhere else. Perhaps, while we were running for our lives out of the cave? “But you’ve got to be extremely careful with this stuff, since gems like these aren’t at all easy to hide. And it’s not as if you, me, or anyone else we know can go get some more if you lose what you’ve got here.”

If not for the detour around the security check points and Customs when we returned to the states the night before, Alistair’s incredibly precious gems would likely have been confiscated... forever.

“So, I take it that Jeremy never told you about another Tree of Life located deeper in the cave system?”

What in the hell?

“No, he didn’t,” I said, after my jaw dropped open. Yeah, I was pretty flabbergasted to hear this information. “When did he tell you that?”

“When you were in the churchyard looking for your precious silver coin, Pops!” he said, smugly. “Apparently the other Tree of Life is in the middle of a much bigger garden, with all kinds of amazing animals, birds, and plant life. He told Amy and me that it more closely resembles the biblical garden outlined in Genesis.”

I could only shake my head after hearing this. Actually, a second garden made a lot of sense to me, as I thought about the angel’s delay in getting back to the Tree of Life we visited when the Russians invaded the cave. At the time I thought Ophanim might’ve been napping on the job. Now, I pictured the angel traveling

through a vast network of caverns from the other Garden of Eden to get back to where we were.

I guess that leaves us with more interestingly cool things to consider.

“Hey, Pops, I just happened to look at the clock... didn’t you say you wanted to visit Mom this afternoon?”

“Yes, I did.” I glanced at the clock on my cell phone, since I gave the wristwatch I’d been wearing for much of the past week back to Cedric just before we landed at Dulles. My preferred timepiece was in my townhouse, still tucked away in the top drawer of my bedroom dresser from where I left it before our trip. “Nurse Larisa told me your mom is retiring early these days when I spoke with her last night.”

“That’s true,” said Alistair. “But Mom looked a lot better when I visited her this morning.”

A hollow feeling touched my awareness for a brief instant until I pushed it away. I reminded myself that at least Beatrice was still with us... I still had more time to spend with her. Before our trip, I thought she might pass at any time. Alistair’s update gave me hope.

“You should go now, so you’ll have more time with her,” said Alistair. “We can get together tomorrow for lunch or dinner, if you’re up to it.”

I smiled again, enjoying the energy my boy seemed to have. Heck, just two weeks ago, Alistair canceled a dinner reservation with me due to feeling beat and exhausted. And that was a couple of weeks after the school year at Georgetown had ended.

“All right, son, we’ll do lunch tomorrow. I’ll call you tonight, after I finish my visit with your mom,” I said, and moved back down the hallway to the front door.

“Have a good time, Pops!” he called after me. “Lock the door as you leave, if you don’t mind!”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you later!”

Once outside, I headed for my Acura and climbed in. My car’s dashboard clock read 2:48 p.m., which would leave me about an hour to visit with my wife if I ripped through traffic. I drove like a maniac, though careful not to put anyone else in danger. It made me feel sort of like a teenager in love, and I had already started the day like this. I picked up a dozen red roses on the way to Alistair’s pad, and they were still fresh despite the summer’s heat. Wrapped and ready, with a love letter I fully expected Beatrice never to read herself. I hoped she could still hear me as I whispered the words to her after my arrival to her room.

“Well, you just made it in time, William!”

Larisa Jones stood by the nurse station, just down the hall from Beatrice’s room. She beamed when she saw the bouquet I carried and shook her head knowingly.

“Boy, if you’re bringing those for your grandmother, I can only imagine the kind of things you do for a girlfriend!”

“Grandma’s favorites and a get well card,” I said, sheepishly, shrugging my shoulders.

Really, I hate the imagery that pops in my head when Nurse Jones looks at me as she did right then. It makes me feel like some juvenile pervert preying on the elderly. If she only knew the truth.

It's one of those moments when I try to flash my focus to fifty years from now, when in all likelihood the Nursing Home and the people working there will be long gone. Of course, that likely meant all of those closest to me would have long disappeared, as well. Keep in mind that I also like this lady named Larisa. She always makes me smile.

"Beatrice is going to love the flowers when she sees them, but she's probably still resting, William," said Larisa. "She's had a good day, though, and seemed a little more coherent for a little while after your dad visited her this morning."

"He told me that she seems a little better," I said. "I hope she continues to get better..."

I couldn't finish my words, as the thought of her imminent passing seized my heart and soul like nothing else—other than my boy's near-death encounters when we were in Iran.

"You better get on in there, William." She glanced at her wristwatch and then at the clock across from the nurse station. "I'll go ahead and allow you to stay in there for forty-five minutes or so, since I know you like to read to her."

She walked down the corridor with me to my wife's room and then gently opened the door. I told her *thank you*, and slid into the room. I thought Larisa might close the door behind me right away, but she snuck into the room and quietly pulled out a vase and filled it with water from a water pitcher on the nightstand closest to my wife. Afterward, she tiptoed out, offering me a shy but warm smile as she closed the door behind her.

I held the card that contained my latest love letter to my wife as I watched her breathe. So frail... though not as near death's door as she had been when I last saw her, a little over a week before. Her breathing was more rhythmic than I remembered—which is always a key thing in determining how close the elderly are to moving on from this world and into the next.

That's good... I may have a few more weeks... maybe even a couple of months with her...

"Hello, my love... I have returned to you as I promised," I whispered sweetly.

I brought the chair I favor over to her bedside, and pulled it up as close to her as possible. Then I read the contents of my letter to her, telling her again how much I regretted ever leaving her so long ago, and how I also regretted not revealing myself to her when she was still of sound mind and body. I finished my discourse with a promise always to love her, as the only woman who ever touched my soul, and that I would always protect and care for Alistair, our beloved son.

Of course, she said nothing, although her breathing deepened a few times during my reading of the last love letter I ever intended to write to her. My closure and maybe the very thing her soul needed to cross over to the other side—to finally break the heaviest tie to those on earth. Alistair had made his peace months before, so it was really just me hanging on to the fantasy that Beatrice might somehow recover and stay with us a few more years.

Since I still had about twenty minutes left, I picked up *Pride and Prejudice* and began reading where I last left off. It's a novel I never tire of, and I've come to believe that's the case because it has always been one of her favorites. When it was time to leave, I set the book down on her dresser and placed the card holding my letter on the side of the nightstand closest to her head. Honestly, I didn't care

if anyone read it and discovered that the young man visiting her was her husband—or, at least *believed* he is her husband.

Sometimes a change of scenery brings a fresh perspective to problems at home. I guess this was my way of letting her go. I fully expected a deluge of tears to engulf me all the way back home to my townhouse. And then I'd deal with my grief for as many weeks, months, and years as it would take.

"I will always love you, Beatrice," I whispered after bending down close to her ear. "You will always be the *one*..."

Unlike the last time I did this, I didn't detect movement behind her eyelids. She seemed to be sleeping soundly. A moment between dreams, perhaps? I would've liked to think she was resting in the Lord's bosom, the thing so many theologians and clergy talk about. At least if she did pass this way, she'd be at her best. The sunken darkness around her eyes had lifted.

As a parting gesture, I reached for her left hand. I noticed her fingers were wrapped around something small and glass-like. Something that glowed.

I gasped.

I couldn't help myself, and though alarmed at first, the realization and myriad possibilities of what this could mean flooded my awareness. Even the army of liver spots on her hand had faded since Alistair placed the crystal in it that morning.

"Hello, William," said Beatrice.

Her voice was still weak... but not shaky. Was she even awake—at least *fully* awake? Hard to say for sure, especially since less than a minute after she spoke she snored softly. But when she said my name, it came with a sense of knowing. It reminded me of how it used to be when we were in Scotland, and she had something dear to her heart to discuss...or had a bone to pick with me.

I reclaimed my chair and brought it up to her bedside. I don't know what I'll tell Nurse Larisa when she returns to kick me out of here. In the meantime, I intend to stay put and wait for my wife—the love of my life—to fully awaken.

Will she deliver a long-overdue tongue lashing for faking my death and leaving her and Alistair to fend for themselves so many decades ago? Or, will this be a reconciliation that is equally suffered for?

Maddening questions, both of them.

Just like me, everyone will have to wait for what's next.



^{*)} Note: The usual mistake; a Glock pistol cannot be cocked.