THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON

DAN BROWN



INFERNO

DAN BROWN

is the bestselling author of *Digital Fortress*, *Deception Point*, *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno*, *Origin* and *The Secret of Secrets*. Three of his Robert Langdon novels have been adapted for the screen by Ron Howard, starring Tom Hanks. They have all been international blockbusters.

Dan Brown is a graduate of Amherst College and Phillips Exeter Academy, where he has taught English and Creative Writing. He lives in New England.

www.danbrown.com
www.danbrownofficial.co.uk

www.penguin.co.uk

Copyrighted Material

BY DAN BROWN

Digital Fortress

An impossibly complex code threatens to obliterate the balance of world power forever . . .

'Fascinating'
Washington Post

Deception Point

An apparently miraculous scientific discovery might change the future of the planet if its truth is revealed . . .

'Thundering'
Chicago Tribune

THE ROBERT LANGDON NOVELS

Angels & Demons

ROME: An ancient secret brotherhood arises once more to launch a devastating new weapon against an unthinkable target . . .

'Heart-racing'
San Francisco Chronicle

The Da Vinci Code

PARIS: A quest almost as old as time itself for an object thought lost forever becomes a deadly race against the clock . . .

'Blockbuster perfection'
New York Times

Copyrighted Material

The Lost Symbol

The kidnapping of a friend will lead Langdon into the shadowy world of freemasonry and a hell-for-leather chase across Washington DC.

'So compelling that several times I came close to cardiac arrest . . . As perfectly constructed as the Washington architecture it escorts us around'
Sunday Express

Inferno

Robert Langdon races against time to try to save the world from a terrifying threat, armed only with a few lines from Dante's *Inferno* to help him.

'Jam-packed with tricks . . . A book-length scavenger hunt that Mr Brown creates so energetically'
New York Times

Origin

Langdon must follow a trail marked only by enigmatic symbols and elusive modern art to discover the truth about an astonishing scientific breakthrough, and come face-to-face with a breathtaking truth that has remained buried – until now.

'Fans will not be disappointed'
The Times

The Secret of Secrets

Robert Langdon must unlock the secrets of one of Europe's oldest cities to save the woman he loves . . .

Copyrighted Material

ACCLAIM FOR DAN BROWN'S NOVELS

'Wow . . . Blockbuster perfection . . . An exhilaratingly brainy thriller. Not since the advent of Harry Potter has an author so flagrantly delighted in leading readers on a breathless chase'
New York Times

'Adroitly blends the chase-scene stuffed thrillers of Robert Ludlum and the learned romps of Umberto Eco . . . For anyone who wants more brain-food than thrillers normally provide'
Sunday Times

'Exceedingly clever . . . Both fascinating and fun . . . a considerable achievement'
Washington Post

'A gripping bestseller . . . Brown has cracked the bestseller code'
Guardian

'Robert Langdon remains a terrific hero, a bookish intellectual who's cool in a crisis and quick on his feet . . . The codes are intriguing, the settings present often-seen locales in a fresh light, and Brown keeps the pages turning'
Entertainment Weekly

'Dan Brown is the master of the intellectual cliffhanger'
Wall Street Journal

'As engaging a hero as you could wish for'
Mail on Sunday

Copyrighted Material

DAN BROWN

INFERNO



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Corgi edition published 2014
Corgi edition reissued 2025

001

Copyright © Dan Brown 2013

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Graph 'Special Report: How Our Economy is Killing the Earth'
(*New Scientist*, 10/16/08) copyright © 2008 Reed Business Information-UK.
All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Media Services.

In this work of fiction, the characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or they are used entirely fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Typeset in 11.5/13.5pt Palatino by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780552169585

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material



FOR MY PARENTS . . .

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Acknowledgments

My most humble and sincere thanks to:

As always, first and foremost, my editor and close friend, Jason Kaufman, for his dedication and talent . . . but mainly for his endless good humor.

My extraordinary wife, Blythe, for her love and patience with the writing process, and also for her superb instincts and candor as a front-line editor.

My tireless agent and trusted friend Heide Lange, for expertly navigating more conversations, in more countries, on more topics than I will ever know. For her skills and energy, I am eternally grateful.

The entire team at Doubleday for its enthusiasm, creativity, and efforts on behalf of my books, with very special thanks to Suzanne Herz (for wearing so many hats . . . and wearing them so well), Bill Thomas, Michael Windsor, Judy Jacoby, Joe Gallagher, Rob Bloom, Nora Reichard, Beth Meister, Maria Carella, Lorraine Hyland, and also to the unending support of Sonny Mehta, Tony Chirico, Kathy Trager, Anne Messitte, and Markus Dohle. To the incredible people of the Random House sales department . . . you are unrivaled.

My sage counsel Michael Rudell, for his pitch-perfect instincts on all matters, large and small, as well as for his friendship.

Copyrighted Material

My irreplaceable assistant Susan Morehouse, for her grace and vitality, and without whom all things descend into chaos.

All of my friends at Transworld, in particular Bill Scott-Kerr for his creativity, support, and good cheer, and also to Gail Rebuck for her superb leadership.

My Italian publisher Mondadori, especially Ricky Cavallero, Piera Cusani, Giovanni Dutto, Antonio Franchini, and Claudia Scheu; and my Turkish publisher Altin Kitaplar, particularly Oya Alpar, Erden Heper, and Batu Bozkurt, for the special services provided in connection with the locations in this book.

My exceptional publishers around the world for their passion, hard work, and commitment.

For their impressive management of the London and Milan translation sites, Leon Romero-Montalvo and Luciano Guglielmi.

The bright Dr. Marta Alvarez González for spending so much time with us in Florence and for bringing to life the city's art and architecture.

The peerless Maurizio Pimponi for all he did to enhance our visit to Italy.

All the historians, guides, and specialists who generously spent time with me in Florence and Venice, sharing their expertise: Giovanna Rao and Eugenia Antonucci at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Serena Pini and staff at the Palazzo Vecchio; Giovanna Giusti at the Uffizi Gallery; Barbara Fedeli at the Baptistery and Il Duomo; Ettore Vito and Massimo Bisson at St. Mark's Basilica; Giorgio Tagliaferro at the Doge's Palace; Isabella di Lenardo, Elizabeth Carroll Consavari, and Elena Svalduz throughout all of Venice; Annalisa Bruni and staff at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana; and to the many others whom

Copyrighted Material

I've failed to mention in this abbreviated list, my sincere thanks.

Rachael Dillon Fried and Stephanie Delman at Sanford J. Greenburger Associates for everything they do both here and abroad.

The exceptional minds of Dr. George Abraham, Dr. John Treanor, and Dr. Bob Helm for their scientific expertise.

My early readers, who provided perspective along the way: Greg Brown, Dick and Connie Brown, Rebecca Kaufman, Jerry and Olivia Kaufman, and John Chaffee.

The web-savvy Alex Cannon, who, along with the team at Sanborn Media Factory, keeps things humming in the online world.

Judd and Kathy Gregg for providing me quiet sanctuary within Green Gables as I wrote the final chapters of this book.

The superb online resources of the Princeton Dante Project, Digital Dante at Columbia University, and the World of Dante.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

INFERNO

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

FACT:

All artwork, literature, science, and historical references in this novel are real.

'The Consortium' is a private organization with offices in seven countries. Its name has been changed for considerations of security and privacy.

Inferno is the underworld as described in Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which portrays hell as an elaborately structured realm populated by entities known as 'shades' – bodiless souls trapped between life and death.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

I am the Shade.

Through the dolent city, I flee.

Through the eternal woe, I take flight.

Along the banks of the river Arno, I scramble, breathless . . . turning left onto Via dei Castellani, making my way northward, huddling in the shadows of the Uffizi.

And still they pursue me.

Their footsteps grow louder now as they hunt with relentless determination.

For years they have pursued me. Their persistence has kept me underground . . . forced me to live in purgatory . . . laboring beneath the earth like a chthonic monster.

I am the Shade.

Here aboveground, I raise my eyes to the north, but I am unable to find a direct path to salvation . . . for the Apennine Mountains are blotting out the first light of dawn.

I pass behind the palazzo with its crenellated tower and one-handed clock . . . snaking through the early-morning vendors in Piazza di San Firenze with their hoarse voices smelling of *lampredotto* and roasted olives. Crossing before the Bargello, I cut west toward the spire of the Badia and come up hard against the iron gate at the base of the stairs.

Copyrighted Material

Here all hesitation must be left behind.

I turn the handle and step into the passage from which I know there will be no return. I urge my leaden legs up the narrow staircase . . . spiraling skyward on soft marble treads, pitted and worn.

The voices echo from below. Beseeching.

They are behind me, unyielding, closing in.

They do not understand what is coming . . . nor what I have done for them!

Ungrateful land!

As I climb, the visions come hard . . . the lustful bodies writhing in fiery rain, the gluttonous souls floating in excrement, the treacherous villains frozen in Satan's icy grasp.

I climb the final stairs and arrive at the top, staggering near dead into the damp morning air. I rush to the head-high wall, peering through the slits. Far below is the blessed city that I have made my sanctuary from those who exiled me.

The voices call out, arriving close behind me. 'What you've done is madness!'

Madness breeds madness.

'For the love of God,' they shout, 'tell us where you've hidden it!'

For precisely the love of God, I will not.

I stand now, cornered, my back to the cold stone. They stare deep into my clear green eyes, and their expressions darken, no longer cajoling, but threatening. 'You know we have our methods. We can force you to tell us where it is.'

For that reason, I have climbed halfway to heaven.

Without warning, I turn and reach up, curling my fingers on to the high ledge, pulling myself up, scrambling on to my knees, then standing . . .

Copyrighted Material

unsteady at the precipice. *Guide me, dear Virgil, across the void.*

They rush forward in disbelief, wanting to grab at my feet, but fearing they will upset my balance and knock me off. They beg now, in quiet desperation, but I have turned my back. *I know what I must do.*

Beneath me, dizzyingly far beneath me, the red tile roofs spread out like a sea of fire on the countryside, illuminating the fair land upon which giants once roamed . . . Giotto, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Botticelli.

I inch my toes to the edge.

'Come down!' they shout. 'It's not too late!'

O, willful ignorants! Do you not see the future? Do you not grasp the splendor of my creation? The necessity?

I will gladly make this ultimate sacrifice . . . and with it I will extinguish your final hope of finding what you seek.

You will never locate it in time.

Hundreds of feet below, the cobblestone piazza beckons like a tranquil oasis. How I long for more time . . . but time is the one commodity even my vast fortunes cannot afford.

In these final seconds, I gaze down at the piazza, and I behold a sight that startles me.

I see your face.

You are gazing up at me from the shadows. Your eyes are mournful, and yet in them I sense a veneration for what I have accomplished. You understand I have no choice. For the love of Mankind, I must protect my masterpiece.

It grows even now . . . waiting . . . simmering beneath the bloodred waters of the lagoon that reflects no stars.

Copyrighted Material

And so, I lift my eyes from yours and I contemplate

the horizon. High above this burdened world, I make my final supplication.

Dearest God, I pray the world remembers my name not as a monstrous sinner, but as the glorious savior you know I truly am. I pray Mankind will understand the gift I leave behind.

My gift is the future.

My gift is salvation.

My gift is Inferno.

With that, I whisper my amen . . . and take my final step, into the abyss.

Copyrighted Material

1

The memories materialized slowly . . . like bubbles surfacing from the darkness of a bottomless well.

A veiled woman.

Robert Langdon gazed at her across a river whose churning waters ran red with blood. On the far bank, the woman stood facing him, motionless, solemn, her face hidden by a shroud. In her hand she gripped a blue *tainia* cloth, which she now raised in honor of the sea of corpses at her feet. The smell of death hung everywhere.

Seek, the woman whispered. *And ye shall find*.

Langdon heard the words as if she had spoken them inside his head. 'Who are you?' he called out, but his voice made no sound.

Time grows short, she whispered. *Seek and find*.

Langdon took a step toward the river, but he could see the waters were bloodred and too deep to traverse. When Langdon raised his eyes again to the veiled woman, the bodies at her feet had multiplied. There were hundreds of them now, maybe thousands, some still alive, writhing in agony, dying unthinkable deaths . . . consumed by fire, buried in feces, devouring one another. He could hear the mournful cries of human suffering echoing across the water.

Copyrighted Material

The woman moved toward him, holding out her slender hands, as if beckoning for help.

'Who are you?!' Langdon again shouted.

In response, the woman reached up and slowly lifted the veil from her face. She was strikingly beautiful, and yet older than Langdon had imagined – in her sixties perhaps, stately and strong, like a timeless statue. She had a sternly set jaw, deep soulful eyes, and long, silver-gray hair that cascaded over her shoulders in ringlets. An amulet of lapis lazuli hung around her neck – a single snake coiled around a staff.

Langdon sensed he knew her . . . trusted her. *But how? Why?*

She pointed now to a writhing pair of legs, which protruded upside down from the earth, apparently belonging to some poor soul who had been buried headfirst to his waist. The man's pale thigh bore a single letter – written in mud – *R*.

R? Langdon thought, uncertain. *As in . . . Robert?* 'Is that . . . *me*?'

The woman's face revealed nothing. *Seek and find*, she repeated.

Without warning, she began radiating a white light . . . brighter and brighter. Her entire body started vibrating intensely, and then, in a rush of thunder, she exploded into a thousand splintering shards of light.

Langdon bolted awake, shouting.

The room was bright. He was alone. The sharp smell of medicinal alcohol hung in the air, and somewhere a machine pinged in quiet rhythm with his heart. Langdon tried to move his right arm, but a sharp pain restrained him. He looked down and saw an IV tugging at the skin of his forearm.

Copyrighted Material

His pulse quickened, and the machines kept pace, pinging more rapidly.

Where am I? What happened?

The back of Langdon's head throbbed, a gnawing pain. Gingerly, he reached up with his free arm and touched his scalp, trying to locate the source of his headache. Beneath his matted hair, he found the hard nubs of a dozen or so stitches caked with dried blood.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember an accident.

Nothing. A total blank.

Think.

Only darkness.

A man in scrubs hurried in, apparently alerted by Langdon's racing heart monitor. He had a shaggy beard, bushy mustache, and gentle eyes that radiated a thoughtful calm beneath his overgrown eyebrows.

'What . . . happened?' Langdon managed. 'Did I have an accident?'

The bearded man put a finger to his lips and then rushed out, calling for someone down the hall.

Langdon turned his head, but the movement sent a spike of pain radiating through his skull. He took deep breaths and let the pain pass. Then, very gently and methodically, he surveyed his sterile surroundings.

The hospital room had a single bed. No flowers. No cards. Langdon saw his clothes on a nearby counter, folded inside a clear plastic bag. They were covered with blood.

My God. It must have been bad.

Now Langdon rotated his head very slowly toward the window beside his bed. It was dark outside. Night. All Langdon could see in the glass was his own reflection – an ashen stranger, pale and weary,

Copyrighted Material

attached to tubes and wires, surrounded by medical equipment.

Voices approached in the hall, and Langdon turned his gaze back toward the room. The doctor returned, now accompanied by a woman.

She appeared to be in her early thirties. She wore blue scrubs and had tied her blond hair back in a thick ponytail that swung behind her as she walked.

'I'm Dr. Sienna Brooks,' she said, giving Langdon a smile as she entered. 'I'll be working with Dr. Marconi tonight.'

Langdon nodded weakly.

Tall and lissome, Dr. Brooks moved with the assertive gait of an athlete. Even in shapeless scrubs, she had a willowy elegance about her. Despite the absence of any makeup that Langdon could see, her complexion appeared unusually smooth, the only blemish a tiny beauty mark just above her lips. Her eyes, though a gentle brown, seemed unusually penetrating, as if they had witnessed a profundity of experience rarely encountered by a person her age.

'Dr. Marconi doesn't speak much English,' she said, sitting down beside him, 'and he asked me to fill out your admittance form.' She gave him another smile.

'Thanks,' Langdon croaked.

'Okay,' she began, her tone businesslike. 'What is your name?'

It took him a moment. 'Robert . . . Langdon.'

She shone a penlight in Langdon's eyes. 'Occupation?'

This information surfaced even more slowly. 'Professor. Art history . . . and symbology. Harvard University.'

Copyrighted Material

Dr. Brooks lowered the light, looking startled. The

doctor with the bushy eyebrows looked equally surprised.

'You're . . . an American?'

Langdon gave her a confused look.

'It's just . . .' She hesitated. 'You had no identification when you arrived tonight. You were wearing Harris Tweed and Somerset loafers, so we guessed British.'

'I'm American,' Langdon assured her, too exhausted to explain his preference for well-tailored clothing.

'Any pain?'

'My head,' Langdon replied, his throbbing skull only made worse by the bright penlight. Thankfully, she now pocketed it, taking Langdon's wrist and checking his pulse.

'You woke up shouting,' the woman said. 'Do you remember why?'

Langdon flashed again on the strange vision of the veiled woman surrounded by writhing bodies. *Seek and ye shall find*. 'I was having a nightmare.'

'About?'

Langdon told her.

Dr. Brooks's expression remained neutral as she made notes on a clipboard. 'Any idea what might have sparked such a frightening vision?'

Langdon probed his memory and then shook his head, which pounded in protest.

'Okay, Mr. Langdon,' she said, still writing, 'a couple of routine questions for you. What day of the week is it?'

Langdon thought for a moment. 'It's Saturday. I remember earlier today walking across campus . . . going to an afternoon lecture series, and then . . . that's pretty much the last thing I remember. Did I fall?'

Copyrighted Material

'We'll get to that. Do you know where you are?'

Langdon took his best guess. 'Massachusetts General Hospital?'

Dr. Brooks made another note. 'And is there someone we should call for you? Wife? Children?'

'Nobody,' Langdon replied instinctively. He had always enjoyed the solitude and independence provided him by his chosen life of bachelorhood, although he had to admit, in his current situation, he'd prefer to have a familiar face at his side. 'There are some colleagues I could call, but I'm fine.'

Dr. Brooks finished writing, and the older doctor approached. Smoothing back his bushy eyebrows, he produced a small voice recorder from his pocket and showed it to Dr. Brooks. She nodded in understanding and turned back to her patient.

'Mr. Langdon, when you arrived tonight, you were mumbling something over and over.' She glanced at Dr. Marconi, who held up the digital recorder and pressed a button.

A recording began to play, and Langdon heard his own groggy voice, repeatedly muttering the same phrase: '*Ve . . . sorry. Ve . . . sorry*.'

'It sounds to me,' the woman said, 'like you're saying, "Very sorry. Very sorry."'

Langdon agreed, and yet he had no recollection of it.

Dr. Brooks fixed him with a disquietingly intense stare. 'Do you have any idea why you'd be saying this? Are you sorry about something?'

As Langdon probed the dark recesses of his memory, he again saw the veiled woman. She was standing on the banks of a bloodred river surrounded by bodies. The stench of death returned.

Copyrighted Material

Langdon was overcome by a sudden, instinctive

sense of danger . . . not just for himself . . . but for everyone. The pinging of his heart monitor accelerated rapidly. His muscles tightened, and he tried to sit up.

Dr. Brooks quickly placed a firm hand on Langdon's sternum, forcing him back down. She shot a glance at the bearded doctor, who walked over to a nearby counter and began preparing something.

Dr. Brooks hovered over Langdon, whispering now. 'Mr. Langdon, anxiety is common with brain injuries, but you need to keep your pulse rate down. No movement. No excitement. Just lie still and rest. You'll be okay. Your memory will come back slowly.'

The doctor returned now with a syringe, which he handed to Dr. Brooks. She injected its contents into Langdon's IV.

'Just a mild sedative to calm you down,' she explained, 'and also to help with the pain.' She stood to go. 'You'll be fine, Mr. Langdon. Just sleep. If you need anything, press the button on your bedside.'

She turned out the light and departed with the bearded doctor.

In the darkness, Langdon felt the drugs washing through his system almost instantly, dragging his body back down into that deep well from which he had emerged. He fought the feeling, forcing his eyes open in the darkness of his room. He tried to sit up, but his body felt like cement.

As Langdon shifted, he found himself again facing the window. The lights were out, and in the dark glass, his own reflection had disappeared, replaced by an illuminated skyline in the distance.

Amid a contour of spires and domes, a single regal facade dominated Langdon's field of view. The building was an imposing stone fortress with a notched

Copyrighted Material

parapet and a three-hundred-foot tower that swelled near the top, bulging outward into a massive machicolated battlement.

Langdon sat bolt upright in bed, pain exploding in his head. He fought off the searing throb and fixed his gaze on the tower.

Langdon knew the medieval structure well. It was unique in the world.

Unfortunately, it was also located four thousand miles from Massachusetts.

Outside his window, hidden in the shadows of the Via Torregalli, a powerfully built woman effortlessly unstraddled her BMW motorcycle and advanced with the intensity of a panther stalking its prey. Her gaze was sharp. Her close-cropped hair – styled into spikes – stood out against the upturned collar of her black leather riding suit. She checked her silenced weapon, and stared up at the window where Robert Langdon's light had just gone out.

Earlier tonight her original mission had gone horribly awry.

The coo of a single dove had changed everything.

Now she had come to make it right.

2

I'm in Florence!?

Robert Langdon's head throbbed. He was now seated upright in his hospital bed, repeatedly jamming his finger into the call button. Despite

Copyrighted Material

the sedatives in his system, his heart was racing.

Dr. Brooks hurried back in, her ponytail bobbing. 'Are you okay?'

Langdon shook his head in bewilderment. 'I'm in . . . Italy!?'

'Good,' she said. 'You're remembering.'

'No!' Langdon pointed out the window at the commanding edifice in the distance. 'I recognize the Palazzo Vecchio.'

Dr. Brooks flicked the lights back on, and the Florence skyline disappeared. She came to his bedside, whispering calmly. 'Mr. Langdon, there's no need to worry. You're suffering from mild amnesia, but Dr. Marconi confirmed that your brain function is fine.'

The bearded doctor rushed in as well, apparently hearing the call button. He checked Langdon's heart monitor as the young doctor spoke to him in rapid, fluent Italian – something about how Langdon was '*agitato*' to learn he was in Italy.

Agitated? Langdon thought angrily. *More like stupefied!* The adrenaline surging through his system was now doing battle with the sedatives. 'What happened to me?' he demanded. 'What day is it?!'

'Everything is fine,' she said. 'It's early morning. Monday, March eighteenth.'

Monday. Langdon forced his aching mind to reel back to the last images he could recall – cold and dark – walking alone across the Harvard campus to a Saturday-night lecture series. *That was two days ago?!* A sharper panic now gripped him as he tried to recall anything at all from the lecture or afterward. *Nothing*. The ping of his heart monitor accelerated.

Copyrighted Material

The older doctor scratched at his beard and

continued adjusting equipment while Dr. Brooks sat again beside Langdon.

'You're going to be okay,' she reassured him, speaking gently. 'We've diagnosed you with retrograde amnesia, which is very common in head trauma. Your memories of the past few days may be muddled or missing, but you should suffer no permanent damage.' She paused. 'Do you remember my first name? I told you when I walked in.'

Langdon thought a moment. 'Sienna.' *Dr. Sienna Brooks*.

She smiled. 'See? You're already forming new memories.'

The pain in Langdon's head was almost unbearable, and his near-field vision remained blurry. 'What . . . happened? How did I get here?'

'I think you should rest, and maybe—'

'How did I get here?!' he demanded, his heart monitor accelerating further.

'Okay, just breathe easy,' Dr. Brooks said, exchanging a nervous look with her colleague. 'I'll tell you.' Her voice turned markedly more serious. 'Mr. Langdon, three hours ago, you staggered into our emergency room, bleeding from a head wound, and you immediately collapsed. Nobody had any idea who you were or how you got here. You were mumbling in English, so Dr. Marconi asked me to assist. I'm on sabbatical here from the U.K.'

Langdon felt like he had awoken inside a Max Ernst painting. *What the hell am I doing in Italy?* Normally Langdon came here every other June for an art conference, but this was March.

The sedatives pulled harder at him now, and he felt as if earth's gravity were growing stronger by the

Copyrighted Material

second, trying to drag him down through his mattress. Langdon fought it, hoisting his head, trying to stay alert.

Dr. Brooks leaned over him, hovering like an angel. 'Please, Mr. Langdon,' she whispered. 'Head trauma is delicate in the first twenty-four hours. You need to rest, or you could do serious damage.'

A voice crackled suddenly on the room's intercom. '*Dr. Marconi?*'

The bearded doctor touched a button on the wall and replied, '*Sì?*'

The voice on the intercom spoke in rapid Italian. Langdon didn't catch what it said, but he did catch the two doctors exchanging a look of surprise. *Or is it alarm?*

'*Momento*,' Marconi replied, ending the conversation.

'What's going on?' Langdon asked.

Dr. Brooks's eyes seemed to narrow a bit. 'That was the ICU receptionist. Someone's here to visit you.'

A ray of hope cut through Langdon's grogginess. 'That's good news! Maybe this person knows what happened to me.'

She looked uncertain. 'It's just odd that someone's here. We didn't have your name, and you're not even registered in the system yet.'

Langdon battled the sedatives and awkwardly hoisted himself upright in his bed. 'If someone knows I'm here, that person must know what happened!'

Dr. Brooks glanced at Dr. Marconi, who immediately shook his head and tapped his watch. She turned back to Langdon.

'This is the ICU,' she explained. 'Nobody is allowed in until nine A.M. at the earliest. In a moment Dr.

Copyrighted Material

Marconi will go out and see who the visitor is and what he or she wants.'

'What about what *I* want?' Langdon demanded.

Dr. Brooks smiled patiently and lowered her voice, leaning closer. 'Mr. Langdon, there are some things you don't know about last night . . . about what happened to you. And before you speak to anyone, I think it's only fair that you have all the facts. Unfortunately, I don't think you're strong enough yet to—'

'What facts!?' Langdon demanded, struggling to prop himself higher. The IV in his arm pinched, and his body felt like it weighed several hundred pounds. 'All I know is I'm in a Florence hospital and I arrived repeating the words "very sorry . . ."'

A frightening thought now occurred to him.

'Was I responsible for a car accident?' Langdon asked. 'Did I hurt someone?!'

'No, no,' she said. 'I don't believe so.'

'Then *what*?' Langdon insisted, eyeing both doctors furiously. 'I have a right to know what's going on!'

There was a long silence, and Dr. Marconi finally gave his attractive young colleague a reluctant nod. Dr. Brooks exhaled and moved closer to his bedside. 'Okay, let me tell you what I know . . . and you'll listen calmly, agreed?'

Langdon nodded, the head movement sending a jolt of pain radiating through his skull. He ignored it, eager for answers.

'The first thing is this . . . Your head wound was not caused by an accident.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'Not really. Your wound, in fact, was caused by a bullet.'

Copyrighted Material

Langdon's heart monitor pinged faster. 'I beg your pardon!?'

Dr. Brooks spoke steadily but quickly. 'A bullet grazed the top of your skull and most likely gave you a concussion. You're very lucky to be alive. An inch lower, and . . .' She shook her head.

Langdon stared at her in disbelief. *Someone shot me?*

Angry voices erupted in the hall as an argument broke out. It sounded as if whoever had arrived to visit Langdon did not want to wait. Almost immediately, Langdon heard a heavy door at the far end of the hallway burst open. He watched until he saw a figure approaching down the corridor.

The woman was dressed entirely in black leather. She was toned and strong with dark, spiked hair. She moved effortlessly, as if her feet weren't touching the ground, and she was headed directly for Langdon's room.

Without hesitation, Dr. Marconi stepped into the open doorway to block the visitor's passage. '*Ferma!*' the man commanded, holding out his palm like a policeman.

The stranger, without breaking stride, produced a silenced handgun. She aimed directly at Dr. Marconi's chest and fired.

There was a staccato hiss.

Langdon watched in horror as Dr. Marconi staggered backward into the room, falling to the floor, clutching his chest, his white lab coat drenched in blood.

Copyrighted Material

3

Five miles off the coast of Italy, the 237-foot luxury yacht *The Mendacium* motored through the predawn mist that rose from the gently rolling swells of the Adriatic. The ship's stealth-profile hull was painted gunmetal gray, giving it the distinctly unwelcoming aura of a military vessel.

With a price tag of over 300 million U.S. dollars, the craft boasted all the usual amenities – spa, pool, cinema, personal submarine, and helicopter pad. The ship's creature comforts, however, were of little interest to its owner, who had taken delivery of the yacht five years ago and immediately gutted most of these spaces to install a lead-lined, military-grade, electronic command center.

Fed by three dedicated satellite links and a redundant array of terrestrial relay stations, the control room on *The Mendacium* had a staff of nearly two dozen – technicians, analysts, operation co-ordinators – who lived on board and remained in constant contact with the organization's various land-based operation centers.

The ship's onboard security included a small unit of military-trained soldiers, two missile-detection systems, and an arsenal of the latest weapons available. Other support staff – cooks, cleaning, and service – pushed the total number on board to more than forty. *The Mendacium* was, in effect, the portable office building from which the owner ran his empire.

Known to his employees only as 'the provost,' he was a tiny, stunted man with tanned skin and deep-set

Copyrighted Material

eyes. His unimposing physique and direct manner seemed well suited to one who had made a vast fortune providing a private menu of covert services along the shadowy fringes of society.

He had been called many things – a soulless mercenary, a facilitator of sin, the devil's enabler – but he was none of these. The provost simply provided his clients with the opportunity to pursue their ambitions and desires without consequence; that mankind was sinful in nature was not his problem.

Despite his detractors and their ethical objections, the provost's moral compass was a fixed star. He had built his reputation – and the Consortium itself – on two golden rules.

Never make a promise you cannot keep.

And never lie to a client.

Ever.

In his professional career, the provost had never broken a promise or reneged on a deal. His word was bankable – an absolute guarantee – and while there were certainly contracts he regretted having made, backing out of them was never an option.

This morning, as he stepped on to the private balcony of his yacht's stateroom, the provost looked across the churning sea and tried to fend off the disquiet that had settled in his gut.

The decisions of our past are the architects of our present.

The decisions of the provost's past had put him in a position to negotiate almost any minefield and always come out on top. Today, however, as he gazed out the window at the distant lights of the Italian mainland, he felt uncharacteristically on edge.

One year ago, on this very yacht, he had made a decision whose ramifications now threatened to

Copyrighted Material

unravel everything he had built. *I agreed to provide services to the wrong man*. There had been no way the provost could have known at the time, and yet now the miscalculation had brought a tempest of unforeseen challenges, forcing him to send some of his best agents into the field with orders to do 'whatever it took' to keep his listing ship from capsizing.

At the moment the provost was waiting to hear from one field agent in particular.

Vayentha, he thought, picturing the sinewy, spike-haired specialist. Vayentha, who had served him perfectly until this mission, had made a mistake last night that had dire consequences. The last six hours had been a scramble, a desperate attempt to regain control of the situation.

Vayentha claimed her error was the result of simple bad luck – the untimely coo of a dove.

The provost, however, did not believe in luck. Everything he did was orchestrated to eradicate randomness and remove chance. Control was the provost's expertise – foreseeing every possibility, anticipating every response, and molding reality toward the desired outcome. He had an immaculate track record of success and secrecy, and with it came a staggering clientele – billionaires, politicians, sheikhs, and even entire governments.

To the east, the first faint light of morning had begun to consume the lowest stars on the horizon. On the deck the provost stood and patiently awaited word from Vayentha that her mission had gone exactly as planned.

Copyrighted Material

4

For an instant, Langdon felt as if time had stopped.

Dr. Marconi lay motionless on the floor, blood gushing from his chest. Fighting the sedatives in his system, Langdon raised his eyes to the spike-haired assassin, who was still striding down the hall, covering the last few yards toward his open door. As she neared the threshold, she looked toward Langdon and instantly swung her weapon in his direction . . . aiming at his head.

I'm going to die, Langdon realized. *Here and now*.

The bang was deafening in the small hospital room.

Langdon recoiled, certain he had been shot, but the noise had not been the attacker's gun. Rather, the bang had been the slam of the room's heavy metal door as Dr. Brooks threw herself against it and turned the lock.

Eyes wild with fear, Dr. Brooks immediately spun and crouched beside her blood-soaked colleague, searching for a pulse. Dr. Marconi coughed up a mouthful of blood, which dribbled down his cheek across his thick beard. Then he fell limp.

'*Enrico, no! Ti prego!*' she screamed.

Outside, a barrage of bullets exploded against the metal exterior of the door. Shouts of alarm filled the hall.

Somehow, Langdon's body was in motion, panic and instinct now overruling his sedatives. As he clambered awkwardly out of bed, a searing hot pain tore into his right forearm. For an instant, he thought a bullet had passed through the door and hit him, but when he looked down, he realized his IV had snapped

Copyrighted Material

off in his arm. The plastic catheter poked out of a jagged hole in his forearm, and warm blood was already flowing backward out of the tube.

Langdon was now fully awake.

Crouched beside Marconi's body, Dr. Brooks kept searching for a pulse as tears welled in her eyes. Then, as if a switch had been flipped inside her, she stood and turned to Langdon. Her expression transformed before his eyes, her young features hardening with all the detached composure of a seasoned ER doctor dealing with a crisis.

'Follow me,' she commanded.

Dr. Brooks grabbed Langdon's arm and pulled him across the room. The sounds of gunfire and chaos continued in the hallway as Langdon lurched forward on unstable legs. His mind felt alert but his heavily drugged body was slow to respond. *Move!* The tile floor felt cold beneath his feet, and his thin hospital gown was scarcely long enough to cover his six-foot frame. He could feel blood dripping down his forearm and pooling in his palm.

Bullets continued to slam against the heavy doorknob, and Dr. Brooks pushed Langdon roughly into a small bathroom. She was about to follow when she paused, turned around, and ran back toward the counter and grabbed his bloody Harris Tweed.

Forget my damned jacket!

She returned clutching his jacket and quickly locked the bathroom door. Just then, the door in the outer room crashed open.

The young doctor took control. She strode through the tiny bathroom to a second door, yanked it open, and led Langdon into an adjoining recovery room. Gunfire echoed behind them as Dr. Brooks stuck her

Copyrighted Material

head out into the hallway and quickly grabbed Langdon's arm, pulling him across the corridor into a stairwell. The sudden motion made Langdon dizzy; he sensed that he could pass out at any moment.

The next fifteen seconds were a blur . . . descending stairs . . . stumbling . . . falling. The pounding in Langdon's head was almost unbearable. His vision seemed even more blurry now, and his muscles were sluggish, each movement feeling like a delayed reaction.

And then the air grew cold.

I'm outside.

As Dr. Brooks hustled him along a dark alley away from the building, Langdon stepped on something sharp and fell, hitting the pavement hard. She struggled to get him back to his feet, cursing out loud the fact that he had been sedated.

As they neared the end of the alley, Langdon stumbled again. This time she left him on the ground, rushing into the street and yelling to someone in the distance. Langdon could make out the faint green light of a taxi parked in front of the hospital. The car didn't move, its driver undoubtedly asleep. Dr. Brooks screamed and waved her arms wildly. Finally the taxi's headlights came on and it moved lazily toward them.

Behind Langdon in the alley, a door burst open, followed by the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. He turned and saw the dark figure bounding toward him. Langdon tried to get back to his feet, but the doctor was already grabbing him, forcing him into the backseat of an idling Fiat taxi. He landed half on the seat and half on the floor as Dr. Brooks dove on top of him, yanking the door shut.

Copyrighted Material

The sleepy-eyed driver turned and stared at the bizarre duo that had just tumbled into his cab – a young, ponytailed woman in scrubs and a man in a half-torn gown with a bleeding arm. He clearly was about ready to tell them to get the hell out of his car, when the side mirror exploded. The woman in black leather sprinted out of the alley, gun extended. Her pistol hissed again just as Dr. Brooks grabbed Langdon's head, pulling it down. The rear window exploded, showering them with glass.

The driver needed no further encouragement. He slammed his foot down on the gas, and the taxi peeled out.

Langdon teetered on the brink of consciousness. *Someone is trying to kill me?*

Once they had rounded a corner, Dr. Brooks sat up and grabbed Langdon's bloody arm. The catheter was protruding awkwardly from a hole in his flesh.

'Look out the window,' she commanded.

Langdon obeyed. Outside, ghostly tombstones rushed by in the darkness. It seemed somehow fitting that they were passing a cemetery. Langdon felt the doctor's fingers probing gently for the catheter and then, without warning, she wrenched it out.

A searing bolt of pain traveled directly to Langdon's head. He felt his eyes rolling back, and then everything went black.

Copyrighted Material

5

The shrill ring of his phone drew the provost's gaze from the calming mist of the Adriatic, and he quickly stepped back into his stateroom office.

It's about time, he thought, eager for news.

The computer screen on his desk had flickered to life, informing him that the incoming call was from a Swedish Sectra Tiger XS personal voice-encrypting phone, which had been redirected through four untraceable routers before being connected to his ship.

He donned his headset. 'This is the provost,' he answered, his words slow and meticulous. 'Go ahead.'

'It's Vayentha,' the voice replied.

The provost sensed an unusual nervousness in her tone. Field agents rarely spoke to the provost directly, and even more rarely did they remain in his employ after a debacle like the one last night. None the less, the provost had required an agent on-site to help remedy the crisis, and Vayentha had been the best person for the job.

'I have an update,' Vayentha said.

The provost was silent, his cue for her to continue.

When she spoke, her tone was emotionless, clearly an attempt at professionalism. 'Langdon has escaped,' she said. 'He has the object.'

The provost sat down at his desk and remained silent for a very long time. 'Understood,' he finally said. 'I imagine he will reach out to the authorities as soon as he possibly can.'

Copyrighted Material

Two decks beneath the provost, in the ship's secure control center, senior facilitator Laurence Knowlton sat in his private cubicle and noticed that the provost's encrypted call had ended. He hoped the news was good. The provost's tension had been palpable for the past two days, and every operative on board sensed there was some kind of high-stakes operation going on.

The stakes are inconceivably high, and Vayentha had better get it right this time.

Knowlton was accustomed to quarterbacking carefully constructed game plans, but this particular scenario had disintegrated into chaos, and the provost had taken over personally.

We've moved into uncharted territory.

Although a half-dozen other missions were currently in process around the world, all of them were being serviced by the Consortium's various field offices, freeing the provost and his staff aboard *The Mendacium* to focus exclusively on this one.

Their client had jumped to his death several days ago in Florence, but the Consortium still had numerous outstanding services on his docket – specific tasks the man had entrusted to this organization regardless of the circumstances – and the Consortium, as always, intended to follow through without question.

I have my orders, Knowlton thought, fully intending to comply. He exited his soundproofed glass cubicle, walking past a half-dozen other chambers – some transparent, some opaque – in which duty officers were handling other aspects of this same mission.

Knowlton crossed through the thin, processed air of the main control room, nodding to the tech crew, and entered a small walk-in vault containing a dozen

Copyrighted Material

strongboxes. He opened one of the boxes and retrieved its contents – in this case, a bright red memory stick. According to the task card attached, the memory stick contained a large video file, which the client had directed them to upload to key media outlets at a specific time tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow's anonymous upload would be simple enough, but in keeping protocol for all digital files, the flowchart had flagged this file for review *today* – twenty-four hours prior to delivery – to ensure the Consortium had adequate time to perform any necessary decryption, compiling, or other preparation that might be required before uploading it at the precise hour.

Nothing left to chance.

Knowlton returned to his transparent cubicle and closed the heavy glass door, blocking out the outside world.

He flipped a switch on the wall, and his cubicle instantly turned opaque. For privacy, all of the glass-walled offices aboard *The Mendacium* were built with 'suspended particle device' glass. The transparency of SPD glass was easily controlled by the application or removal of an electric current, which either aligned or randomized millions of tiny rodlike particles suspended within the panel.

Compartmentalization was a cornerstone of the Consortium's success.

Know only your own mission. Share nothing.

Now, ensconced in his private space, Knowlton inserted the memory stick into his computer and clicked the file to begin his assessment.

Immediately his screen faded to black . . . and his speakers began playing the soft sound of lapping water. An image slowly appeared on-screen . . .

Copyrighted Material

amorphous and shadowy. Emerging from the darkness, a scene began to take shape . . . the interior of a cave . . . or a giant chamber of some sort. The floor of the cavern was water, like an underground lake. Strangely, the water appeared to be illuminated . . . as if from within.

Knowlton had never seen anything like it. The entire cavern shone with an eerie reddish hue, its pale walls awash with tendril-like reflections of rippling water. *What . . . is this place?*

As the lapping continued, the camera began to tilt downward and descend vertically, directly toward the water until the camera pierced the illuminated surface. The sounds of rippling disappeared, replaced by an eerie hush beneath the water. Submerged now, the camera kept descending, moving down through several feet of water until it stopped, focusing on the cavern's silt-covered floor.

Bolted to the floor was a rectangular plaque of shimmering titanium.

The plaque bore an inscription.

IN THIS PLACE, ON THIS DATE,
THE WORLD WAS CHANGED FOREVER.

Engraved at the bottom of the plaque was a name and a date.

The name was that of their client.

The date . . . tomorrow.

Copyrighted Material

6

Langdon felt firm hands lifting him now . . . urging him from his delirium, helping him out of the taxi. The pavement felt cold beneath his bare feet.

Half supported by the slender frame of Dr. Brooks, Langdon staggered down a deserted walkway between two apartment buildings. The dawn air rustled, billowing his hospital gown, and Langdon felt cold air in places he knew he shouldn't.

The sedative he'd been given in the hospital had left his mind as blurred as his vision. Langdon felt like he was underwater, attempting to claw his way through a viscous, dimly lit world. Sienna Brooks dragged him onward, supporting him with surprising strength.

'Stairs,' she said, and Langdon realized they had reached a side entrance of the building.

Langdon gripped the railing and trudged dizzily upward, one step at a time. His body felt ponderous. Dr. Brooks physically pushed him now. When they reached the landing, she typed some numbers into a rusted old keypad and the door buzzed open.

The air inside was not much warmer, but the tile floors felt like soft carpet on the soles of his feet compared to the rough pavement outside. Dr. Brooks led Langdon to a tiny elevator and yanked open a folding door, herding Langdon into a cubicle that was about the size of a phone booth. The air inside smelled of MS cigarettes – a bittersweet fragrance as ubiquitous in Italy as the aroma of fresh espresso. Ever so slightly, the smell helped clear Langdon's mind. Dr. Brooks pressed a button, and somewhere high above them, a

Copyrighted Material

series of tired gears clunked and whirred into motion.

Upward . . .

The creaky carriage shimmied and vibrated as it began its ascent. Because the walls were nothing but metal screens, Langdon found himself watching the inside of the elevator shaft slide rhythmically past them. Even in his semiconscious state, Langdon's life-long fear of cramped spaces was alive and well.

Don't look.

He leaned on the wall, trying to catch his breath. His forearm ached, and when he looked down, he saw that the sleeve of his Harris Tweed had been tied awkwardly around his arm like a bandage. The remainder of the jacket was dragging behind him on the ground, frayed and filthy.

He closed his eyes against his pounding headache, but the blackness engulfed him again.

A familiar vision materialized – the statuesque, veiled woman with the amulet and silver hair in ringlets. As before, she was on the banks of a bloodred river and surrounded by writhing bodies. She spoke to Langdon, her voice pleading. *Seek and ye shall find!*

Langdon was overcome with the feeling that he had to save her . . . save them all. The half-buried, upside-down legs were falling limp . . . one by one.

Who are you!? he called out in silence. *What do you want?!*

Her luxuriant silver hair began fluttering in a hot wind. *Our time grows short*, she whispered, touching her amulet necklace. Then, without warning, she erupted in a blinding pillar of fire, which billowed across the river, engulfing them both.

Langdon shouted, his eyes flying open.

Dr. Brooks eyed him with concern. 'What is it?'

Copyrighted Material

'I keep hallucinating!' Langdon exclaimed. 'The same scene.'

'The silver-haired woman? And all the dead bodies?'

Langdon nodded, perspiration beading on his brow.

'You'll be okay,' she assured him, despite sounding shaky herself. 'Recurring visions are common with amnesia. The brain function that sorts and catalogs your memories has been temporarily shaken up, and so it throws everything into one picture.'

'Not a very nice picture,' he managed.

'I know, but until you heal, your memories will be muddled and uncataloged – past, present, and imagination all mixed together. The same thing happens in dreams.'

The elevator lurched to a stop, and Dr. Brooks yanked open the folding door. They were walking again, this time down a dark, narrow corridor. They passed a window, outside of which the murky silhouettes of Florence rooftops had begun emerging in the predawn light. At the far end of the hall, she crouched down and retrieved a key from beneath a thirsty-looking houseplant and unlocked a door.

The apartment was tiny, the air inside hinting at an ongoing battle between a vanilla-scented candle and old carpeting. The furniture and artwork were meager at best – as if she had furnished it at a yard sale. Dr. Brooks adjusted a thermostat, and the radiators banged to life.

She stood a moment and closed her eyes, exhaling heavily, as if to collect herself. Then she turned and helped Langdon into a modest kitchenette whose Formica table had two flimsy chairs.

Copyrighted Material

Langdon made a move toward a chair in hopes of

sitting down, but Dr. Brooks grabbed his arm with one hand and opened a cabinet with her other. The cabinet was nearly bare . . . crackers, a few bags of pasta, a can of Coke, and a bottle of NoDoz.

She took out the bottle and dumped six caplets into Langdon's palm. 'Caffeine,' she said. 'For when I work night shifts like tonight.'

Langdon put the pills in his mouth and glanced around for some water.

'Chew them,' she said. 'They'll hit your system faster and help counteract the sedative.'

Langdon began chewing and instantly cringed. The pills were bitter, clearly meant to be swallowed whole. Dr. Brooks opened the refrigerator and handed Langdon a half-empty bottle of San Pellegrino. He gratefully took a long drink.

The ponytailed doctor now took his right arm and removed the makeshift bandage that she'd fashioned out of his jacket, which she laid on the kitchen table. Then she carefully examined his wound. As she held his bare arm, Langdon could feel her slender hands trembling.

'You'll live,' she announced.

Langdon hoped she was going to be okay. He could barely fathom what they'd both just endured. 'Dr. Brooks,' he said, 'we need to call somebody. The consulate . . . the police. Somebody.'

She nodded in agreement. 'Also, you can stop calling me Dr. Brooks – my name is Sienna.'

Langdon nodded. 'Thanks. I'm Robert.' It seemed the bond they'd just forged fleeing for their lives warranted a first-name basis. 'You said you're British?'

'By birth, yes.'

Copyrighted Material

'I don't hear an accent.'

'Good,' she replied. 'I worked hard to lose it.'

Langdon was about to enquire why, but Sienna motioned for him to follow. She led him down a narrow corridor to a small, gloomy bathroom. In the mirror above the sink, Langdon glimpsed his reflection for the first time since seeing it in the window of his hospital room.

Not good. Langdon's thick dark hair was matted, and his eyes looked bloodshot and weary. A shroud of stubble obscured his jaw.

Sienna turned on the faucet and guided Langdon's injured forearm under the ice-cold water. It stung sharply, but he held it there, wincing.

Sienna retrieved a fresh washcloth and squirted it with antibacterial soap. 'You may want to look away.'

'It's fine. I'm not bothered by—'

Sienna began scrubbing violently, and white-hot pain shot up Langdon's arm. He clenched his jaw to prevent himself from shouting out in protest.

'You don't want an infection,' she said, scrubbing harder now. 'Besides, if you're going to call the authorities, you'll want to be more alert than you are now. Nothing activates adrenaline production like pain.'

Langdon held on for what felt like a full ten seconds of scrubbing before he forcefully yanked his arm away. *Enough!* Admittedly, he felt stronger and more awake; the pain in his arm had now entirely overshadowed his headache.

'Good,' she said, turning off the water and patting his arm dry with a clean towel. Sienna then applied a small bandage to his forearm, but as she did so, Langdon found himself distracted by something he had just noticed – something deeply upsetting to him.

Copyrighted Material

For nearly four decades, Langdon had worn an antique collector's edition Mickey Mouse timepiece, a gift from his parents. Mickey's smiling face and wildly waving arms had always served as his daily reminder to smile more often and take life a little less seriously.

'My . . . watch,' Langdon stammered. 'It's gone!' Without it, he felt suddenly incomplete. 'Was I wearing it when I arrived at the hospital?'

Sienna shot him an incredulous look, clearly mystified that he could be worried about such a trivial thing. 'I don't remember any watch. Just clean yourself up. I'll be back in a few minutes and we'll figure out how to get you some help.' She turned to go, but paused in the doorway, locking eyes with him in the mirror. 'And while I'm gone, I suggest you think very hard about why someone would want to kill you. I imagine it's the first question the authorities will ask.'

'Wait, where are you going?'

'You can't talk to the police half naked. I'm going to find you some clothes. My neighbor is about your size. He's away, and I'm feeding his cat. He owes me.'

With that, Sienna was gone.

Robert Langdon turned back to the tiny mirror over the sink and barely recognized the person staring back at him. *Someone wants me dead*. In his mind, he again heard the recording of his own delirious mumblings.

Very sorry. Very sorry.

He probed his memory for some recollection . . . anything at all. He saw only emptiness. All Langdon knew was that he was in Florence, having suffered a bullet wound to the head.

As Langdon stared into his own weary eyes, he half wondered if he might at any moment wake up in his reading chair at home, clutching an empty martini

Copyrighted Material

glass and a copy of *Dead Souls*, only to remind himself that Bombay Sapphire and Gogol should never be mixed.

7

Langdon shed his bloody hospital gown and wrapped a towel around his waist. After splashing water on his face, he gingerly touched the stitches on the back of his head. The skin was sore, but when he smoothed his matted hair down over the spot, the injury all but disappeared. The caffeine pills were kicking in, and he finally felt the fog beginning to lift.

Think, Robert. Try to remember.

The windowless bathroom was suddenly feeling claustrophobic, and Langdon stepped into the hall, moving instinctively toward a shaft of natural light that spilled through a partially open door across the corridor. The room was a makeshift study of sorts, with a cheap desk, a worn swivel chair, assorted books on the floor, and, thankfully . . . a *window*.

Langdon moved toward daylight.

In the distance, the rising Tuscan sun was just beginning to kiss the highest spires of the waking city – the campanile, the Badia, the Bargello. Langdon pressed his forehead to the cool glass. The March air was crisp and cold, amplifying the full spectrum of sunlight that now peeked up over the hillsides.

Painter's light, they called it.

At the heart of the skyline, a mountainous dome of red tiles rose up, its zenith adorned with a gilt copper

Copyrighted Material

ball that glinted like a beacon. Il Duomo. Brunelleschi had made architectural history by engineering the basilica's massive dome, and now, more than five hundred years later, the 375-foot-tall structure still stood its ground, an immovable giant on Piazza del Duomo.

Why would I be in Florence?

For Langdon, a lifelong aficionado of Italian art, Florence had become one of his favorite destinations in all of Europe. This was the city on whose streets Michelangelo played as a child, and in whose studios the Italian Renaissance had ignited. This was Florence, whose galleries lured millions of travelers to admire Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, Leonardo's *Annunciation*, and the city's pride and joy – *Il Davide*.

Langdon had been mesmerized by Michelangelo's *David* when he first saw it as a teenager . . . entering the Accademia delle Belle Arti . . . moving slowly through the somber phalanx of Michelangelo's crude *Prigioni* . . . and then feeling his gaze dragged upward, inexorably, to the seventeen-foot-tall masterpiece. The *David's* sheer enormity and defined musculature startled most first-time visitors, and yet for Langdon, it had been the genius of David's pose that he found most captivating. Michelangelo had employed the classical tradition of *contrapposto* to create the illusion that David was leaning to his right, his left leg bearing almost no weight, when, in fact, his left leg was supporting tons of marble.

The *David* had sparked in Langdon his first true appreciation for the power of great sculpture. Now Langdon wondered if he had visited the masterpiece during the last several days, but the only memory he could conjure was that of awakening in the hospital

Copyrighted Material

and watching an innocent doctor murdered before his eyes. *Very sorry. Very sorry.*

The guilt he felt was almost nauseating. *What have I done?*

As he stood at the window, his peripheral vision caught a glimpse of a laptop computer sitting on the desk beside him. Whatever had happened to Langdon last night, he suddenly realized, might be in the news.

If I can access the Internet, I might find answers.

Langdon turned toward the doorway and called out: 'Sienna?!'

Silence. She was still at the neighbor's apartment looking for clothes.

Having no doubt Sienna would understand the intrusion, Langdon opened the laptop and powered it up.

Sienna's home screen flickered to life – a standard Windows 'blue cloud' background. Langdon immediately went to the Google Italia search page and typed in *Robert Langdon*.

If my students could see me now, he thought as he began the search. Langdon continually admonished his students for Googling themselves – a bizarre new pastime that reflected the obsession with personal celebrity that now seemed to possess American youth.

A page of search results materialized – hundreds of hits pertaining to Langdon, his books, and his lectures. *Not what I'm looking for.*

Langdon restricted the search by selecting the news button.

A fresh page appeared: *News results for 'Robert Langdon*.'

Book signings: Robert Langdon to appear . . .

Graduation address by Robert Langdon . . .

Copyrighted Material

Robert Langdon publishes Symbol primer for . . .

The list was several pages long, and yet Langdon saw nothing recent – certainly nothing that would explain his current predicament. *What happened last night?* Langdon pushed on, accessing the Web site for *The Florentine*, an English-language newspaper published in Florence. He scanned the headlines, breaking-news sections, and police blog, seeing articles on an apartment fire, a government embezzling scandal, and assorted incidents of petty crime.

Anything at all?!

He paused at a breaking-news blurb about a city official who, last night, had died of a heart attack in the plaza outside the cathedral. The official's name had yet to be released, but no foul play was suspected.

Finally, not knowing what else to do, Langdon logged on to his Harvard e-mail account and checked his messages, wondering if he might find answers there. All he found was the usual stream of mail from colleagues, students, and friends, much of it referencing appointments for the coming week.

It's as if nobody knows I'm gone.

With rising uncertainty, Langdon shut down the computer and closed the lid. He was about to leave when something caught his eye. On the corner of Sienna's desk, atop a stack of old medical journals and papers, sat a Polaroid photograph. The snapshot was of Sienna Brooks and her bearded doctor colleague, laughing together in a hospital hallway.

Dr. Marconi, Langdon thought, racked with guilt as he picked up the photo and studied it.

As Langdon replaced the photo on the stack of books, he noticed with surprise the yellow booklet on top – a tattered playbill from the London Globe

Copyrighted Material

Theatre. According to the cover, it was for a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* . . . staged nearly twenty-five years ago.

Scrawled across the top of the playbill was a handwritten message in Magic Marker: *Sweetheart, never forget you're a miracle*.

Langdon picked up the playbill, and a stack of press clippings fell out on to the desk. He quickly tried to replace them, but as he opened the booklet to the weathered page where the clippings had been, he stopped short.

He was staring at a cast photo of the child actor portraying Shakespeare's mischievous sprite Puck. The photo showed a young girl who could not have been more than five, her blond hair in a familiar ponytail.

The text below her photo read: *A star is born*.

The bio was a gushing account of a child theater prodigy – Sienna Brooks – with an off-the-chart IQ, who had, in a single night, memorized every character's lines and, during initial rehearsals, often cued her fellow cast members. Among this five-year-old's hobbies were violin, chess, biology, and chemistry. The child of a wealthy couple in the London suburb of Blackheath, the girl was already a celebrity in scientific circles; at the age of four, she had beat a chess grand master at his own game and was reading in three languages.

My God, Langdon thought. *Sienna. That explains a few things.*

Langdon recalled one of Harvard's most famous graduates had been a child prodigy named Saul Kripke, who at the age of six had taught himself Hebrew and read all of the works of Descartes by the

Copyrighted Material

age of twelve. More recently, Langdon recalled reading about a young phenom named Moshe Kai Cavalin, who, at age eleven, had earned a college degree with a 4.0 grade-point average and won a national title in martial arts, and, at fourteen, published a book titled *We Can Do*.

Langdon picked up another press clipping, a newspaper article with a photo of Sienna at age seven: CHILD GENIUS DISPLAYS 208 IQ.

Langdon had been unaware that IQs even went that high. According to the article, Sienna Brooks was a virtuoso violinist, could master a new language in a month, and was teaching herself anatomy and physiology.

He looked at another clipping from a medical journal: THE FUTURE OF THOUGHT: NOT ALL MINDS ARE CREATED EQUAL.

This article had a photo of Sienna, now maybe ten years old, still a towhead, standing beside a large piece of medical apparatus. The article contained an interview with a doctor, who explained that PET scans of Sienna's cerebellum revealed that it was *physically* different from other cerebella, in her case a larger, more streamlined organ capable of manipulating visual-spatial content in ways that most human beings could not begin to fathom. The doctor equated Sienna's physiological advantage to an unusually accelerated cellular growth in her brain, much like a cancer, except that it accelerated growth of beneficial brain tissue rather than dangerous cancer cells.

Langdon found a clipping from a small-town newspaper.

THE CURSE OF BRILLIANCE.

There was no photo this time, but the story told of a

Copyrighted Material

young genius, Sienna Brooks, who had tried to attend regular schools but was teased by other students because she didn't fit in. It talked about the isolation felt by gifted young people whose social skills could not keep up with their intellects and who were often ostracized.

Sienna, according to this article, had run away from home at the age of eight, and had been smart enough to live on her own undiscovered for ten days. She had been found in an upscale London hotel, where she had pretended to be the daughter of a guest, stolen a key, and was ordering room service on someone else's account. Apparently she had spent the week reading all 1,600 pages of *Gray's Anatomy*. When authorities asked why she was reading medical texts, she told them she wanted to figure out what was wrong with her brain.

Langdon's heart went out to the little girl. He couldn't imagine how lonely it must be for a child to be so profoundly different. He refolded the articles, pausing for one last look at the photo of the five-year-old Sienna in the role of Puck. Langdon had to admit, considering the surreal quality of his encounter with Sienna this morning, that her role as the mischievous, dream-inducing sprite seemed strangely apt. Langdon only wished that he, like the characters in the play, could now simply wake up and pretend that his most recent experiences were all a dream.

Langdon carefully replaced all the clippings on the proper page and closed the playbill, feeling an unexpected melancholy as he again saw the note on the cover: *Sweetheart, never forget you're a miracle.*

His eyes moved down to the familiar symbol adorning the cover of the playbill. It was the same early

Copyrighted Material

Greek pictogram that adorned most playbills around the world – a 2,500-year-old symbol that had become synonymous with dramatic theater.

Le maschere.



Langdon looked at the iconic faces of Comedy and Tragedy gazing up at him, and suddenly he heard a strange humming in his ears – as if a wire were slowly being pulled taut inside his mind. A stab of pain erupted inside his skull. Visions of a mask floated before his eyes. Langdon gasped and raised his hands, sitting down in the desk chair and closing his eyes tightly, clutching at his scalp.

In his darkness, the bizarre visions returned with a fury . . . stark and vivid.

The silver-haired woman with the amulet was calling to him again from across a bloodred river. Her shouts of desperation pierced the putrid air, clearly audible over the sounds of the tortured and dying, who thrashed in agony as far as the eye could see. Langdon again saw the upside-down legs adorned with the letter *R*, the half-buried body pedaling its legs in wild desperation in the air.

Seek and find! the woman called to Langdon. *Time is running out!*

Langdon again felt the overwhelming need to help her . . . to help *everyone*. Frantic, he shouted back to her across the bloodred river. *Who are you?!*

Once again, the woman reached up and lifted her veil to reveal the same striking visage that Langdon had seen earlier.

Copyrighted Material

I am life, she said.

Without warning, a colossal image materialized in the sky above her – a fearsome mask with a long, beaklike nose and two fiery green eyes, which stared blankly out at Langdon.

And . . . I am death, the voice boomed.

8

Langdon's eyes shot open, and he drew a startled breath. He was still seated at Sienna's desk, head in his hands, heart pounding wildly.

What the hell is happening to me?

The images of the silver-haired woman and the beaked mask lingered in his mind. *I am life. I am death*. He tried to shake the vision, but it felt seared permanently into his mind. On the desk before him, the playbill's two masks stared up at him.

Your memories will be muddled and uncataloged, Sienna had told him. *Past, present, and imagination all mixed together.*

Langdon felt dizzy.

Somewhere in the apartment, a phone was ringing. It was a piercing, old-fashioned ring, coming from the kitchen.

'Sienna?!' Langdon called out, standing up.

No response. She had not yet returned. After only two rings, an answering machine picked up.

'*Ciao, sono io*,' Sienna's voice happily declared on her outgoing message. '*Lasciatemi un messaggio e vi richiamerò*.'

Copyrighted Material