

JEREMY CHRIST

They killed his ancestors.

They hunted his children.

Now he's the one hunting.

Jeremy Schoemaker

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First edition, 2026.

PROLOGUE

Esterdahl Mortuary and Crematory, Ltd.

Moline, Illinois

November 3, 2020 - 2:47 AM



The fire started in the records room.

By the time the Moline Fire Department arrived, flames consumed the entire east wing of Esterdahl Mortuary, clawing thirty feet into the cold November sky. The 911 call had come at 2:43 AM

from a passing motorist who spotted smoke billowing from the windows of the funeral home on 7th Avenue.

Inside, **Bart Krebs** made a decision that would change everything.

The 34-year-old mortuary curator had been working late, completing paperwork on the previous day's cremation—**Robert C. Schoemaker**, age 75, a locally prominent Freemason who had been nationally recognized for his contributions to the fraternity. Bart had known Robert's wife from his high school years; she had been his English teacher, the one who had believed in him when no one else did. Mrs. Schoemaker had been kind to him, had seen potential in a troubled kid from the wrong side of town.

Now her husband's ashes sat in an urn in the memorial viewing room, scheduled to be picked up by the family later that week.

Bart didn't think. He ran.

Through smoke so thick he couldn't see his own hands, through heat that blistered the skin on his face, he navigated by memory to the viewing room. His lungs screamed. His eyes watered and blurred. But he found the mahogany urn with Robert Schoemaker's name engraved on a brass plate, grabbed it, and stumbled back through the inferno toward the emergency exit.

He burst through the door and collapsed on the wet grass, the urn clutched to his chest, as the fire department's ladder truck rounded the corner.

Later, much later, after the fire was ruled "suspicious in origin," after the insurance investigators asked their questions, after Bart had been treated for second-degree burns and smoke inhalation, he would call Mrs. Schoemaker.

"I have Robert's ashes," he would tell her, his voice hoarse. "They're safe."

What Bart Krebs didn't know—what he *couldn't* know—was that he had just disrupted a plan nearly two thousand years in the making.

And that somewhere in Rome, in an office without windows deep beneath Vatican City, a phone was ringing.

Cardinal Enzo Rossini answered on the second ring.

He listened in silence. His jaw tightened. His fingers—the same fingers that had signed death warrants for seventeen bloodline carriers across four continents—clenched around a silver crucifix on his desk.

“The ashes survived,” he said. Not a question.

A pause.

“Then we have a problem.” His voice was ice. “The Schoemaker bloodline must end. Tonight, if possible. Use whatever resources you need.”

He hung up. Opened a drawer. Inside: a single sheet of paper bearing the papal seal and three words in Latin.

Licentia ad necandum.

Permission to kill.

Rossini lifted the phone again.

“Wake the assassin,” he said. “Tell him we have work in Illinois.”

He replaced the receiver and sat motionless for a long moment, his gaze drifting to a photograph on the corner of his desk. A young man in a seminarian’s cassock stared back at him—dark hair, eager eyes, a smile full of faith and hope. Naples, 1962. A lifetime ago. A different man entirely.

Forty years of service to protect the faith. Rossini touched the photograph’s edge. *How many lives had he ended? How many more before this was done?*

He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a rosary—simple wooden beads, worn smooth by decades of prayers. His mother’s. She had pressed it into his hands the day he left for seminary, whispering, “*When the burden grows too heavy, give it to God.*”

The burden had never been heavier.

Rossini rose and crossed to the small altar in the corner of his office—a simple wooden kneeler before a crucifix that had belonged to his grandmother. The Christ figure was worn smooth by generations of prayers. He lowered himself to his knees, bones protesting, and wrapped his mother’s rosary around his clasped hands.

“Forgive me, Lord,” he whispered. “Forgive me for what I must do.”

He didn’t pray for success. He had stopped doing that years ago. He prayed for forgiveness—for what he had done, and for what he was about to do.

“I do this not for power,” he breathed. “Not for the Vatican. Not for myself. I do it for the two billion souls who need to believe. Who *must* believe. Let my sins be counted against me, Lord. But let my purpose serve Your children.”

The words came easier now than they had thirty years ago, when he’d signed his first death warrant. Back then, he’d wept for three days afterward. Now he simply prayed.

If the bloodline is revealed, faith collapses. He’d seen the projections, commissioned by Vatican statisticians who had no idea what they were calculating. *Two billion Catholics. Four billion Christians worldwide. All of them anchored by the divinity of Christ.*

What happens when that anchor is cut?

Rossini had studied history. He knew. The gulags. The camps. The nihilism that swept through every society that abandoned God. Without the Church, humanity was a ship without a rudder, spinning toward the rocks.

The needs of the many, he thought, outweigh the needs of the few.

He had protected humanity from this chaos for forty years. The Church had done so for two thousand. One more death—one more family—was a small price for the salvation of billions.

“I am not a murderer,” Rossini said to the crucifix. “I am a shepherd. And sometimes shepherds must cull the flock to save it.”
He crossed himself, rose, and returned to his desk.
The work of God was never finished.

* * *

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Bloodline

Character	Role	Description
Jeremy Schoemaker	Protagonist, 62nd Generation	Self-made internet millionaire from the Quad Cities. Age 46. Tech entrepreneur who built three successful companies. Skeptical but resourceful. Carrier of the Sangreal bloodline.
Robert Schoemaker	C. Jeremy's Father (deceased)	32° Scottish Rite Mason, Valley of Davenport. Longest-surviving heart transplant recipient in medical history (24 years). Keeper of the Amulet. Died November 2020.
Joyce Ann Coulter Schoemaker ("Joyce")	Jeremy's Mother	Former English teacher. Maiden name Coulter. Goes by Joyce. Keeper of family secrets she only partially understood.

Character	Role	Description
Brandi Schoemaker	Jeremy's Wife	Woman of deep faith. Mother to Sarah; stepmother to Juliet and Joslyn. Descendant of a parallel bloodline branch.
Dr. J. Elizabeth Schoemaker	Jeremy's Ex-Wife	Lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. Biological mother of Juliet and Joslyn. Off-page presence; appears through phone calls and text messages only.
Juliet Schoemaker	Jeremy's Daughter	Age 17. Brilliant codebreaker. Helped crack the Pigpen Cipher. 62nd Generation carrier. Lives in Lincoln with her mother.
Joslyn Schoemaker	Jeremy's Daughter	Age 15. Pattern recognition prodigy. 62nd Generation carrier. Lives in Lincoln with her mother.
Andrea Schoemaker	Jeremy's Sister	Covert operative for the Brotherhood. Runs European operations with her fiancé Brandon. Their father's secret weapon.
Brandon Hamilton	Andrea's Fiancé	Former military intelligence. Berlin-based coordinator for the Brotherhood's European network.
Sarah Schoemaker	Jeremy's Daughter	Born September 25, 2021. Named for Sarah Magdalene. The 63rd Generation.

The Brotherhood (Freemasons)

Character	Role	Description
Arthur Brennan	Worshipful Master, Davenport Lodge	Silver-haired, seventies. Calm under pressure. Deep historical knowledge. Jeremy's primary protector and mentor.
Denise Crawford	Security Consultant	U.S. Army Captain (retired). African American, scar on left cheek. Military precision. Former Army Intelligence.
Sir Malcolm Graham	Grand Master Mason of Scotland	Edinburgh Lodge. Oversees authentication of the Sangreal Proof.
Marcus Webb	Chicago Lodge	Former Delta Force. Part of rescue team.

The Custodes Fidei (Guardians of the Faith)

Character	Role	Description
Cardinal Rossini	Enzo Head of the Custodes Fidei	Age 73. Born Naples, 1952. Forty years protecting the Church's darkest secret. Believes he serves the greater good.
Father DiMaggio	Marco Field Operative	Vatican priest and trained assassin. Handles "wet work" for the Custodes.
The Shepherd	Codename	Rossini's personal assassin. Patient. Ruthless. Never misses.

Supporting Characters

Character	Role	Description
Bart Krebs	Mortuary Curator	Age 34. Saved Robert's ashes from the fire. Former student of Joyce Schoemaker.
Maggie Findley	Brandi's Mother (Jeremy's mother-in-law)	Devout Christian, deep researcher. Seminary-trained in biblical studies and ecclesiastical history. Cracks the Pigpen Cipher on her first attempt. Late 60s. Lives in the Dallas area.
Janet	Bank Teller, Cordova	Masonic contact. Recognizes the Amulet. Provides access to safety deposit box 777.
Dr. Marcus Chen	Geneticist, University of Nebraska	Jeremy's friend. Verifies the DNA evidence is scientifically unprecedented.

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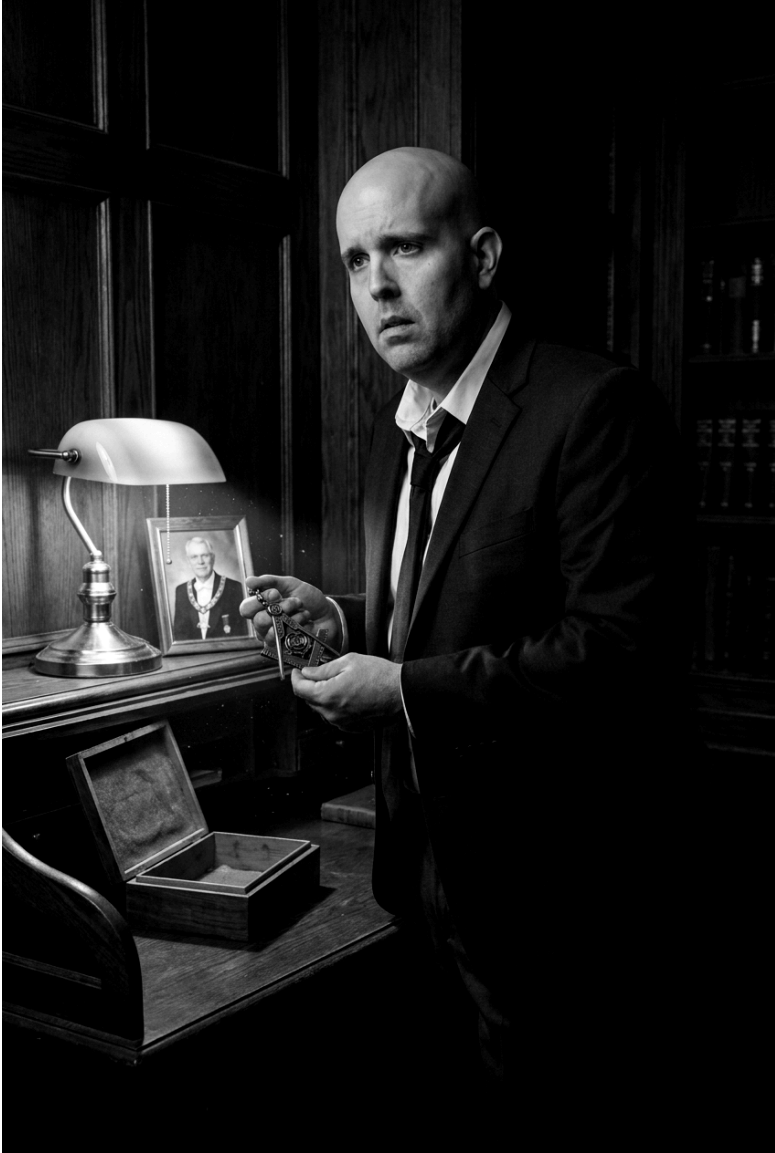
PART ONE: THE INHERITANCE

CHAPTER 1: THE

WALNUT BOX

Rock Island, Illinois

November 7, 2020



Jeremy Schoemaker hadn't been back to Illinois in six years.

He stood in the driveway of his childhood home, a modest ranch on the edge of Rock Island, staring at the place where he'd grown up. The basketball hoop he'd played on still hung above the garage door, rusted and netless. His rental car—a bland silver Camry that had seemed perfectly adequate at the Quad Cities airport—looked out of place here, too clean, too new.

He was 46 now, though most people guessed younger.

His phone buzzed. A text from Brandi, his wife: *Made it okay? Praying for you. Call me tonight. Love you.*

He typed back: *Just got here. Love you too.*

His phone buzzed again. Unknown number. He glanced at the screen—no message, just the notification. A wrong number, probably. He ignored it.

He thought about calling the girls, but it was a school day. Juliet would be in AP Chemistry right now, probably acing another test. Joslyn in her coding club, building something brilliant. They'd want to know about Grandpa, about the funeral arrangements. But that conversation could wait until tonight, when they weren't surrounded by classmates.

Brandi. The best thing that had happened to him since his divorce. She'd heard all his stories—the near-death experiences, the impossible recoveries, the string of coincidences that had shaped his life. “You’ve lived a thousand lives,” she always said, shaking her head in wonder. “God’s got plans for you, Jeremy. I don’t know what they are, but they’re big.”

But even Brandi’s faith couldn’t have bought him time with his father.

“Jeremy?”

His mother stood in the doorway. She looked older, smaller somehow. The last four days since his father’s death had carved new lines into her face.

“Mom.” He climbed the steps and embraced her, feeling how thin she’d become. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner.”

"You're here now." She pulled back, managed a weak smile. "That's what matters. Come inside. I need to... there are some things your father wanted you to have."

The house smelled the same—coffee and old books and his mother's lavender sachets. But it felt empty now, hollow, like a stage set after the play had ended. His father's reading chair sat in the corner, a biography of Benjamin Franklin face-down on the armrest, reading glasses perched on top. Waiting for a reader who would never return.

"The mortuary," his mother said as she led him to the kitchen table. "You heard what happened?"

"The fire. You told me on the phone." Jeremy sat down. "They're saying it was arson?"

"Suspicious, at least. Bart Krebs—you remember him? He was in your sister Andrea's year at Rock Island High. He saved your father's ashes." Her voice cracked. "Ran into a burning building for them."

"That's... that's incredible."

"He was my student. Sweet boy. Always struggled with reading comprehension, but he had a good heart." She pulled a wooden box from the counter, set it on the table between them. It was made of dark walnut, about the size of a shoebox, with intricate carvings on the lid. "Your father left instructions. In his will. He said if anything happened to him, I was to give you this box. Only you. Not Andrea, just you."

Jeremy stared at the box. The carvings weren't random—they were symbols. A compass. A square. The all-seeing eye.

Masonic symbols.

"I don't understand," Jeremy said. "Dad knew I never joined the Masons. He tried to recruit me for years. I always said no."

"I know. But he insisted. 'Jeremy will understand when the time comes,' that's what he said." She pushed the box toward him. "It's not locked."

Jeremy lifted the lid.

Inside, nestled in red velvet, were three items:

First: A brass amulet on a heavy chain, about the size of a silver dollar. The face was divided into quadrants, each containing a different symbol—a Templar cross, a Masonic square and compass, a rose, and something that looked like a chalice. Around the edge, tiny letters spelled out words in Latin: *SANGUIS CHRISTI SANGREAL*

Blood of Christ. Holy Grail.

Jeremy almost laughed. *Great. Dad was into Dan Brown conspiracy theories.*

He'd seen this before—retirees who fell down internet rabbit holes, convinced they were secretly descended from royalty or Knights Templar or whatever the History Channel was pushing that week. Genealogy enthusiasts were always finding connections to Charlemagne or Mary Queen of Scots. Next his father would be telling him they were related to King Arthur.

But still... his father had worn this? Under his shirt? *Always?* That didn't sound like the practical, no-nonsense Robert Schoemaker he'd known.

Second: A small leather-bound journal, ancient-looking, its pages yellowed and brittle. The cover bore a single stamped symbol: a six-pointed star overlaid with the letter "T."

Third: A letter, sealed with red wax bearing his father's Masonic seal, addressed in his father's handwriting: *For Jeremy—Open only when you're alone.*

"He wore that amulet," his mother said quietly, pointing to the brass pendant. "Under his shirt, always. I never knew where it came from. He said it was a family heirloom, passed down from his father Clarence, and his father before him. He said... he said you needed to be the one to carry it now."

Jeremy picked up the amulet. It was heavier than it looked—far heavier, as if the brass contained something denser, something that wanted to be held. The metal was warm to the touch, as if it had been recently worn, and it seemed to pulse against his palm with a weight that had nothing to do with physics.

A memory surfaced, unbidden. He was eight years old, sneaking into his parents' bedroom while they were at a neighbor's barbecue. He'd found the amulet in his father's dresser drawer, hidden under socks. The moment his fingers touched it, something happened—a jolt, like static electricity but deeper, running up his arm and into his chest. He'd dropped it like it burned him. When his father came home, he'd somehow *known*. Had taken Jeremy aside, knelt down, looked him in the eyes with an intensity that had terrified him. *"You must never touch that until I say it's time. Do you understand? Never."* Jeremy had nodded, too scared to ask why. He'd buried the memory for thirty-six years.

Now, holding it again, he felt that same strange current. But this time it didn't feel like a warning.

It felt like recognition.

Sixty generations of hands had held this. His father's. His grandfather's. All the way back. He turned it over. The back was smooth except for a series of strange angular symbols etched in microscopic script—dots and lines arranged in what looked like fragments of a grid.

Jeremy frowned. He'd seen symbols like this before. Where?

Then it clicked. A late night in 2015, down a Wikipedia rabbit hole about secret societies while researching a marketing campaign for a client who sold "mystery boxes." The **Pigpen Cipher**—also called the **Masonic Cipher** or **Freemason's Cipher**. A simple substitution system where letters were replaced by portions of a grid.

His tech brain kicked in automatically. He pulled out his phone, searched for “Pigpen Cipher decoder,” and found a reference chart. Letter by letter, he translated the angular symbols:

┐	┌	·		┐	□	·	□	┌	,	-	┐	□	·	┌		┌	
4	1	.	5	0	8	3	,	-	9	0	.	5	1	5	1		

41.5083, -90.5151

“Coordinates,” Jeremy murmured, his voice barely a whisper.

“What?”

“GPS coordinates. Latitude and longitude.” His fingers trembled slightly as he typed them into Google Maps. The pin dropped on a location about twenty minutes away. “It’s... it’s pointing to somewhere in Cordova. Along the Mississippi River.”

His mother’s face went pale. “Cordova? Your grandfather Clarence used to have a fishing cabin out there. Sold it in the eighties, I think. I haven’t thought about that place in decades.”

The cabin. Another buried memory clawed its way to the surface. He was twelve, maybe thirteen. A summer afternoon. He’d asked his father if they could go fishing at Grandpa’s old cabin. His father’s reaction had been instant and absolute—not anger exactly, but something harder. Fear. *“That cabin doesn’t exist anymore, Jeremy. We don’t talk about it. We don’t go there. Ever.”* When Jeremy had pressed, asked why, his father had gripped his shoulder hard enough to leave fingerprints. *“Some places hold secrets that aren’t ready to be found. When the time is right, you’ll understand.”*

Jeremy had thought it was just his father being weird. Midwest superstition. Old-man nonsense.

Now his father was dead, and the amulet was pointing him straight to the place he’d been forbidden to go.

Jeremy looked at the sealed letter, then at the ancient journal. His father had been a good man—honest, straightforward, a Midwest Mason who coached Little League and volunteered at the

food bank. This cloak-and-dagger stuff wasn't like him at all.

Unless his father had been hiding something.

Something worth dying for.

"Mom, I need to read this letter. Privately."

She nodded, understanding in her eyes. "Your old room is exactly how you left it."

Jeremy was halfway up the stairs when he heard it.

A car door. Then another.

He froze. Moved to the window at the top of the landing and looked down at the street.

A black sedan had pulled up behind his rental car. Two men in dark suits were climbing out, their eyes fixed on the house.

"Mom," Jeremy called down, his voice tight. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No, honey, why—"

The doorbell rang.

Jeremy looked at the wooden box in his hands. At the amulet. At the letter addressed to him alone.

If anything happened to him...

His father's words echoed in his mind. Words he hadn't even read yet.

The doorbell rang again. Longer this time. Insistent.

"Don't answer it," Jeremy said. "Go to your room. Lock the door."

"Jeremy, what—"

"NOW, Mom."

The words came out with an authority he didn't know he possessed. And as his mother hurried toward her bedroom, Jeremy realized where that authority came from.

He was sixteen. His father had woken him at 3 AM, led him to the backyard without explanation. For two hours in the dark, Robert Schoemaker had taught his teenage son things that made no sense at the time: how to move through a house without mak-

ing noise, which rooms had sight lines to the street, where to hide if strangers ever came to the door. *"You'll probably never need this,"* his father had said as dawn broke. *"But if you ever do, you'll thank me."* Jeremy had chalked it up to his father's paranoia—too many spy novels, too many late-night History Channel documentaries. He'd never mentioned it again.

Until now. Now his body remembered every lesson, every escape route his father had mapped in his mind thirty years ago.

Dad knew. He knew this day would come.

He slipped into his childhood bedroom and closed the door. His hands shook as he broke the wax seal.

The first line stopped his heart.

You are not who you think you are.

Jeremy's eyes raced over the next lines. Words that couldn't be real. Words about bloodlines and ancient orders and... Jesus Christ. Literally.

He almost laughed out loud. His father—practical, Midwest, coached-Little-League Robert Schoemaker—claiming their family was descended from Jesus of Nazareth?

This is insane, Jeremy thought. *Dad was a practical man. This sounds like a Dan Brown novel.*

But even as he dismissed it, his mind searched for explanations. The dementia. His father had been sharper than men half his age until the end, but what if there had been something they'd missed? Late-stage paranoia? Some elaborate delusion triggered by knowing death was coming?

Or maybe this was some kind of Masonic thing. A ritual. A test. Dad had spent decades trying to get Jeremy to join the Lodge—maybe this was the world's most elaborate recruitment prank. "Surprise! You're related to Jesus! Now sign up for the pancake breakfast committee."

The amulet. The ancient journal. The sealed letter. If this was a prank, it was incredibly well-produced.

But it had to be. Because the alternative—that his father had spent his entire life hiding a secret about their family’s divine origins—was simply not possible. Jeremy had built three successful companies on data, on evidence, on separating reality from wishful thinking. And this? This was pure fantasy.

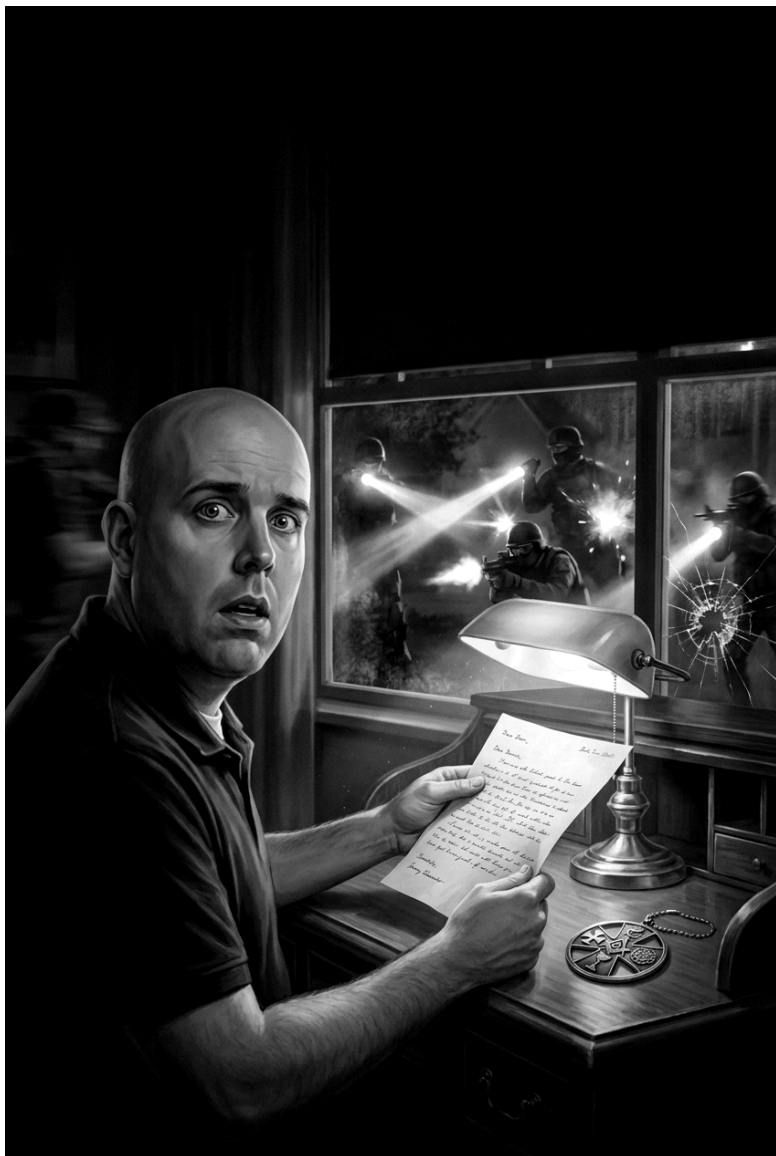
Wasn’t it?

Downstairs, the front door splintered open.

* * *

CHAPTER 2: THE

LETTER



The pounding on the front door echoed through the house.

Jeremy's childhood bedroom was a time capsule from 1992—Posters of Michael Jordan and Nirvana, a bookshelf crammed with Tom Clancy novels, the desk where he'd taught himself HTML. But he barely saw any of it.

His hands trembled as he unfolded the letter, the wax seal already broken.

Downstairs, his mother's voice: "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but my son isn't here. He's staying at a hotel in Davenport."

Good girl, Mom. She was buying him time.

The handwriting was his father's, but the tone was nothing like the man he'd known:

*My Dear Son,
If you're reading this, then I am gone, and the
burden I have carried now passes to you.*

Downstairs, a man's voice—sharp, demanding: "Ma'am, we have reason to believe your son may be in danger. It's imperative we speak with him."

Jeremy's eyes raced across the page.

*You are not who you think you are, Jeremy. Our
family is part of a bloodline that traces back two
thousand years. We are descended from Jesus of
Nazareth and Mary Magdalene.*

Jeremy laughed out loud. He couldn't help it—the sound just burst out of him, sharp and incredulous.

Descended from Jesus Christ. Right.

He looked at the letter again, half-expecting to see "GOTCHA" scrawled at the bottom. Some elaborate Masonic joke. Ha ha, Dad got you good.

But no. The handwriting was steady. Serious. The wax seal was real.

The man spent thirty years as a heart transplant survivor, Jeremy thought. Thirty years of immunosuppressants, anti-rejection drugs, steroids. Maybe the medications finally got to his brain. He'd heard of patients developing strange delusions near the end. Paranoia. Grandiosity. Believing they were chosen for some special purpose.

He'd seen it happen to his uncle Frank—the man had spent his final months convinced the CIA was monitoring his television. Alzheimer's, the doctors said. But it had started exactly like this: earnest letters about vast conspiracies, urgent warnings about shadowy enemies. By the end, Frank had been raving about satellite dishes and mind control frequencies. The family had nodded along, made sympathetic noises, then quietly discussed nursing homes behind his back.

Was this the same thing? Had his father's brilliant, methodical mind finally cracked under the weight of mortality?

Jeremy ran his thumb over the wax seal. The letter was dated three weeks ago. His father had been lucid then—sharp, even. They'd talked on the phone about the Huskers' bowl chances, about Juliet's college applications, about whether Omaha would get snow before Thanksgiving. Nothing in that conversation had suggested a man teetering on the edge of delusion.

But that's how it works, isn't it? The decline could be sudden. A blood clot. A medication interaction. One bad night, and a lifetime of sanity unraveled.

His father—practical, Midwest, coached-Little-League Robert Schoemaker—had apparently decided their family was descended from the Son of God.

"Sir, I really must insist you leave." His mother's voice, firmer now. "I've told you, he's not here."

Read the rest, some part of him insisted. You owe him that much.

Jeremy forced himself to keep reading.

There are others who seek to destroy this bloodline. An ancient order within the Catholic Church called the Custodes Fidei—the Guardians of the Faith. They are patient, methodical, and ruthless. I believe they know about me. About our family.

His skin prickled. He glanced at the window. Could he fit through it? The roof of the garage was just below—

The amulet is your key. The coordinates on the back will guide you to a safety deposit box I maintained under a false name. Inside: documents, DNA evidence, and instructions. When you are ready, present the amulet to the Worshipful Master at the Grand Lodge in Davenport. He will know what it means.

Footsteps on the stairs.

No. Not yet.

Trust no one outside the Brotherhood. Move quickly. And Jeremy—I chose you because you are the one who left. You built a life off the grid. Now I understand why.

The final lines, scrawled hastily:

*Protect the bloodline. Protect the truth.
I love you, son.
—Dad*

A knock on the bedroom door.

“Jeremy?” His mother’s voice, strained. “These gentlemen say they’re from the State Department. They say it’s about your father’s work overseas.”

State Department. His father had never worked overseas. Not officially.

A cold thought seized him. *Mom. Brandi. The girls.*

If these men were here, were there others? A black sedan parked outside the house in Dallas where Brandi was probably making dinner? Men in suits watching Juliet and Joslyn walk to class in Lincoln?

Stop. He couldn’t think about that now. He had to move.

Jeremy shoved the letter into his pocket, grabbed the amulet and journal, and crossed to the window in three silent strides.

“Just a moment, Mom,” he called. “I’m getting dressed.”

He slid the window open, eased onto the garage roof, and dropped into the backyard.

The rental car was out front. Useless now. But his father’s old pickup—the one his mother never drove—was in the detached garage out back.

Keys on the hook. Just like always.

Thirty seconds later, Jeremy was on Route 67, heading toward Cordova, the amulet heavy in his pocket.

Too heavy.

As the adrenaline faded, the absurdity of it all crashed over him. He pulled the amulet from his pocket, held it up in the fading light. A brass trinket with Latin words and Masonic symbols. *Sanguis Christi Sangreal.* Blood of Christ. The Royal Blood.

The Mississippi’s right there, he thought, glancing at the dark ribbon of water running parallel to the road. *Throw it in. Drive back to the airport. Fly home to Brandi and pretend this never happened.*

His father had lost his mind. Simple as that. Twenty years of heart medication, twenty-four years of borrowed time—eventually it had to affect his thinking. This “bloodline” nonsense was the delusion of a dying man who’d read too many conspiracy theories.

Jeremy rolled down the window. Cold November air rushed in, carrying the smell of the river.

His arm extended. The amulet dangled over the rushing pavement.

This is insane. Dad lost his mind at the end.

But something made him pull his arm back inside.

A voice from twenty years ago. His father, sitting across from him at the kitchen table the night before Jeremy left for Stanford. They’d been talking about life, about choices, about what matters. And then, out of nowhere, his father had said something strange: *“There will come a day when everything I’ve told you seems like a lie. When the world will show you evidence that your father was a fool. On that day, Jeremy, trust your gut. Not the evidence. The evidence can be manufactured. Your gut can’t.”*

Jeremy had laughed it off. Filed it under “weird Dad advice” alongside “never eat yellow snow” and “always check the oil before a road trip.” But now, sitting on the shoulder of Route 67 with the Mississippi rushing past and armed men probably searching for him, the words hit different.

Trust your gut. Not the evidence.

His gut said throw the amulet in the river and forget this nightmare.

But deeper than that—beneath the fear, beneath the skepticism—something else stirred. Something that felt less like instinct and more like... recognition.

He pulled his arm back inside. Not belief. Not yet. But caution. The entrepreneur in him—the part that had learned the hard way not to make irreversible decisions based on incomplete data.

He pulled off onto the shoulder, engine idling, and pulled out his phone. If this bloodline nonsense was real, there would be evidence online. And if it wasn't—if it was the conspiracy theory he suspected—then the internet would tell him that too.

Jeremy typed into Google: *Jesus bloodline conspiracy theory*

The results loaded instantly. Wikipedia. History Channel articles. Book reviews. Forums. Thousands of pages dedicated to the idea that Jesus had children whose descendants still walked the earth.

He clicked on the Wikipedia entry for “Priory of Sion.”

The article was damning.

The Priory of Sion was a fringe organization founded in France in 1956 by Pierre Plantard, a draughtsman and convicted fraudster...

Jeremy kept reading, his skepticism hardening with every paragraph.

...Plantard fabricated evidence, including forged parchments planted in the Bibliothèque nationale de France...

...The “secret dossiers” claiming to document the Priory’s ancient origins were exposed as hoaxes in 1993 by French researchers...

...The book “Holy Blood, Holy Grail” (1982) popularized these fabrications, despite their historical invalidity...

He scrolled further. The debunking was thorough, methodical, devastating. Serious historians had picked apart every claim. The “ancient bloodline” that supposedly connected Jesus to the Merovingian kings of France? Based entirely on forged documents created in the 1960s by a French con artist who had also claimed to be the true king of France.

This is what Dad believed, Jeremy thought. A debunked hoax. A fraud exposed thirty years ago.

He opened another tab. Searched for “Jesus married Mary Magdalene evidence.”

More of the same. Gnostic gospels that scholars dated to the second and third centuries—written a hundred years or more after Jesus died. Fragmentary texts with contested translations. The Gospel of Philip, which mentioned Jesus kissing Mary—but the word used could mean kiss on the cheek, the standard greeting between early Christians. Nothing conclusive. Nothing that would hold up in court.

He searched: *Merovingian bloodline Jesus scholarly criticism*

The academic consensus was brutal. No credible historian believed any of it. The “evidence” cited in popular books was either forged, misinterpreted, or wildly speculative. The entire field was dominated by amateur genealogists and conspiracy theorists, not real researchers.

Jeremy sat back, phone in hand, and exhaled slowly.

Dad read these books, he thought. Maybe he even met some of these people. And they convinced him. They told him what he wanted to hear—that his life had meaning, that his family was special, that surviving thirty years with a transplanted heart meant something divine.

It made sense. His father had been dying. People facing death often turned to religion, to mysticism, to anything that promised significance. And the Masons—God knows what they’d told him over the decades. Secret rituals, ancient knowledge, the comfort of belonging to something larger than yourself.

I should go to the police.

The thought crystallized suddenly, clearly. Armed men had shown up at his mother’s house. That was suspicious at minimum, potentially criminal. Real law enforcement could investigate real crimes.

He didn’t need secret societies or bloodline conspiracies. He needed Detective Mike Hartley from the Rock Island Police Department—the guy who’d spoken at his high school career day twenty-five years ago. Real cop. Real badge. Real jurisdiction.

Jeremy actually put the truck in gear, ready to turn around. He could picture it clearly: walking into the station, asking for Hartley—or whoever was on duty—and calmly explaining that men claiming to be from the State Department had appeared at his mother's house hours after his father's funeral. That there had been a suspicious fire at the mortuary. That he was worried about his family's safety.

That's the rational move, he told himself. That's what a sane person does.

The police would take a statement. They'd send a patrol car to check on his mother. They'd investigate the mortuary fire. Maybe they'd even discover something real—an insurance scam, a competitor sabotaging the business, something mundane and explicable. Something that would make all this bloodline nonsense evaporate like morning fog.

Jeremy pulled a U-turn on Route 67.

For about a hundred yards.

Then he stopped again, pulled to the shoulder, and sat with the engine idling.

The police.

What would he actually tell them? That men in suits had knocked on his mother's door, claimed to be from the State Department, and... what? His mother had let them in. They hadn't kicked down the door. They hadn't threatened her—not overtly. Jeremy hadn't witnessed anything that would constitute a crime. He'd been hiding in his childhood bedroom, reading a letter about Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.

And then what? He'd climb out the window, steal his dead father's truck, and fled like a fugitive?

"So let me get this straight, Mr. Schoemaker. You ran away from men who were asking questions. You have no evidence of any crime. And your concern is based on a letter claiming you're descended from Jesus Christ?"

He could hear the detective's voice. The careful, neutral tone they used with people who needed psychiatric evaluation.

"Sir, have you been under a lot of stress lately? Losing a parent can trigger episodes..."

If he went to the cops with a story about secret Vatican assassins hunting the descendants of Jesus Christ, they'd either laugh him out of the station or put him on a psychiatric hold. And while he was explaining himself to skeptical detectives, whoever was actually hunting him would have hours to regroup.

Another memory surfaced. His father, watching a news story about some whistleblower who'd been discredited and destroyed. Jeremy had been maybe fourteen. *"See that?"* his father had said, pointing at the TV. *"That man told the truth. And the system ground him to dust. Remember this, Jeremy: institutions protect institutions. If you ever find yourself holding a truth that threatens powerful people, don't go to the authorities. The authorities ARE the powerful people."*

At fourteen, it had sounded like paranoid nonsense. Something a guy who watched too much X-Files would say.

But his father hadn't watched X-Files. His father had coached Little League and volunteered at the food bank and worn a heart that wasn't his for twenty-four years. His father had been the least paranoid person Jeremy knew.

Unless he knew something worth being paranoid about.

He wasn't ready to write off the threat as delusion. Not yet. Not until he had more information.

But there was something else. Something that didn't fit.

Why did they come at all?

If this was all a hoax—if the Priory of Sion was fake, if the bloodline claims were debunked nonsense—then why had armed men shown up at his mother's house within hours of his father's

death? Who sends a team of professionals to retrieve the belongings of a dead Midwestern Mason who'd fallen for a thirty-year-old conspiracy theory?

Hoaxes don't usually come with assassins.

The thought stopped him cold.

Con artists didn't hire hit squads. Genealogy fraudsters didn't monitor funerals. If this was just the delusion of a dying man, then his father's belongings should be worthless—just embarrassing keepsakes for the family to quietly throw away.

But someone believed it was real enough to kill for.

Someone believed it enough to burn down funeral homes.

Someone believed it enough to track him here, now, tonight.

Jeremy looked at the amulet in his hand. At the coordinates etched on the back. At the road stretching toward Cordova.

I don't believe any of this, he told himself firmly. *But I'm going to find out why they do.*

He pulled back onto Route 67 and kept driving.

He checked the rearview mirror. Clear. Just the empty road and the fading silhouette of his childhood home.

His phone buzzed. A text from Juliet—a selfie she'd sent that morning, her and Joslyn making goofy faces outside Lincoln East High School. He'd smiled when he first saw it. Now he glanced at it again, seeking comfort in their faces.

Something caught his eye. In the background, barely visible near the school entrance: a man in a dark overcoat, standing very still, looking at his phone. Facing the camera.

Jeremy's thumb hovered over the screen. *Coincidence*. Lincoln was full of parents and teachers. Men in coats. Men on phones.

But something about the angle. The stillness. Like he wasn't looking *at* his phone, but *through* it.

Jeremy shook his head and pocketed the device. Paranoia. That's all it was.

He had bigger problems right now.

What he didn't see was the figure on the roof of the house across the street.

The man in black lay prone behind the chimney, eye pressed to the scope of a suppressed rifle. He tracked the pickup truck as it disappeared around the corner, then touched his earpiece.

"Target is mobile. Heading northwest on 67. I have the shot if he returns."

The voice in his ear was calm. Italian-accented. "Hold position. Let him lead us to the proof. Then eliminate the entire bloodline."

The shooter adjusted his grip on the rifle.

He was a patient man.

* * *

CHAPTER 3: THE

VAULT



The coordinates led Jeremy to a Bank of America branch in the small river town of Cordova, Illinois. It was 4:47 PM when he pulled into the parking lot, the November sun already low on the horizon.

Inside, he approached a teller, a woman in her fifties with kind eyes and a nametag that read *JANET*.

"I need to access a safety deposit box," Jeremy said. "I believe it's under the name..." He paused. His father's letter hadn't mentioned the name. Think, Jeremy. "Sangreal? Or possibly Tiedemann?"

Janet's expression didn't change, but something flickered in her eyes. "Let me check our records. One moment."

She disappeared into a back office. Jeremy glanced around the bank, suddenly paranoid. An elderly man at the ATM. A young couple filling out paperwork. A man in a dark suit standing near the door, reading a pamphlet about mortgage rates.

Normal. Everything looked normal.

So why did Jeremy's skin prickle with warning?

Janet returned. "Mr. Sangreal's box. Yes, we have it. May I see identification and the access key?"

Jeremy showed his driver's license. "I don't have a key. The box holder recently passed away. I'm his son."

Janet hesitated. "I'm very sorry for your loss, but without the key, I can't—"

"Please." Jeremy pulled the amulet from his pocket, laid it on the counter between them. "Does this help?"

Janet stared at the amulet. Her face went white.

Not surprised-white. Not confused-white.

Terrified-white.

This was a woman who had worked in banking for decades. She'd seen fraud, robbery, probably worse. And a brass pendant with Latin words had drained the blood from her face in an instant.

She knows, Jeremy realized. She knows exactly what this is. And she's scared to death of it.

A chill traced his spine. If this was all some elaborate hoax his father had constructed—if this was just the delusion of a dying man—then why was a middle-aged bank teller looking at him like he'd just walked in with a live grenade?

"Follow me," she whispered. "Quickly."

She led him through the back office, past other employees who barely looked up, to a secure vault door. She punched in a code, pressed her thumb to a scanner, and the massive door swung open with a hiss of hydraulics.

"Box 777," she said, her voice still hushed. "Your father visited it every year on November first. All Saints' Day. He said... he said if anyone ever came with *that*"—she nodded at the amulet—"I was to give them full access, no questions asked."

"You knew him?"

"He was a good man. A Brother." She touched two fingers to her lips, then her heart. A gesture Jeremy didn't recognize. "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Schoemaker. Be careful. There are people watching."

"What people?"

But Janet just shook her head and left him alone in the vault.

* * *

Seven hundred miles away, in Lincoln, Nebraska, Juliet Schoemaker walked out of Lincoln East High School, backpack slung over one shoulder, laughing at something her friend had said. She didn't notice the black sedan parked across the street. She didn't see the driver raise a camera with a telephoto lens, or the soft click of the shutter as it captured her face in perfect focus.

The sedan had been there for three hours.

* * *

Box 777 was larger than Jeremy had expected, roughly the size of a small suitcase. As he knelt on the cold vault floor, a familiar twinge shot through his right thigh—the old scar tissue from the bicycle accident, pulling the way it always did.

Thirty-four years since that day. The handlebar grip had torn a six-inch gash from knee to groin. He'd seen his own femur through the wound. The surgeons had said *amputate*—he'd heard them through the shock. But somehow the damage had missed every artery, every nerve, every critical muscle. By millimeters. As if something had *guided* the destruction around everything that mattered.

Miracles happen, his father used to say. *The question is whether you're paying attention.*

Jeremy shook off the memory. Using a drill provided by the bank, he opened the lock mechanism in fifteen minutes.

Inside the box:

One: A manila envelope containing DNA test results from a private lab in Switzerland. The cover letter was embossed with a logo—an hourglass intertwined with a double helix—and a name: *Chronos Genomics, Zurich*. Jeremy's tech instincts kicked in; he'd never heard of this lab, but the report format screamed legitimacy. Chain of custody documentation. Laboratory accreditation numbers. Three different testing methodologies listed: Y-chromosome analysis, mitochondrial DNA sequencing, and autosomal marker comparison.

The report was titled "Y-Chromosome Haplogroup Analysis: Schoemaker/Tiedemann Lineage."

Jeremy flipped through the pages, his eyes catching technical details he half-understood from his years in the tech industry. The lab specialized in ancient DNA extraction—samples from Egyptian mummies, Viking burial sites, Neolithic skeletons. They'd pioneered techniques for recovering genetic material from fragments thousands of years old. According to their methodology section,

they'd analyzed three distinct sample types for comparison: a degraded textile sample (origin redacted), ossuary bone fragments (origin redacted), and modern blood samples from living subjects.

One line jumped out, highlighted in yellow: *Markers consistent with Levantine origin, 1st-2nd century CE, rare haplogroup J-M267, historically associated with ancient Judean populations.*

But it was the conclusion that made Jeremy's breath catch: *Subject demonstrates seven anomalous genetic markers designated SNG-1 through SNG-7, matching reference samples with 99.9999997% concordance. These markers appear in no population database worldwide. Statistical probability of coincidental match: approximately 1 in 4.7 trillion.*

His father's handwriting in the margin: *Three independent verification methods. Three independent labs. Same result every time.*

Two: Photocopies of documents from the Vatican Secret Archives, labeled "Restricted—Authorized Access Only." They appeared to be 13th-century inquisition records, written in Latin. One name was highlighted in yellow: *Dietrich von Sangre, Knights Templar, arrested 1307, interrogated regarding heretical claims of sacred bloodline.*

Jeremy sat back on his heels, frustration rising in his chest.

Old papers. That's the proof?

He'd built three companies on data. Real data. Metrics you could measure, test, replicate. Not photocopies of medieval documents that could have been forged by any competent history grad student with access to a laser printer and some tea-staining techniques.

"I'm a tech guy," he muttered to the empty vault. "I believe in evidence. Data. Not seven-hundred-year-old Latin that nobody can read."

He rifled back through the DNA report from Chronos Genomics. This was better—this was science. But still. A report from a Swiss lab he'd never heard of? Chain of custody from “origin redacted” samples? For all he knew, his father had paid some genetics company to tell him what he wanted to hear.

Jeremy stared at the report, chewing his lip. Then he pulled out his phone and opened the camera. He photographed the first three pages of the DNA analysis—the methodology, the marker identification, the statistical conclusions—and opened his messages.

Marcus Chen. They'd met at a tech conference five years ago, bonded over their shared skepticism of AI hype. Marcus was a geneticist at the University of Nebraska, ran one of the state's leading genomics labs. More importantly, he was the most ruthlessly skeptical scientist Jeremy knew. If anyone could spot a fraudulent DNA report, it was Marcus.

Jeremy typed: *Hey man, weird question. Can you look at something for me? Family stuff.*

He attached the photos and hit send.

The reply came faster than expected. Marcus was probably between classes.

| *Sure. What am I looking at?*

Another message, thirty seconds later:

| *Wait. Where did you get this?*

Jeremy frowned. That wasn't the response he'd expected. He'd expected “this looks fake” or “who made this garbage?” Not curiosity.

He typed: *Found it in my dad's stuff. He passed away last week.*

I'm sorry about your dad. But Jeremy... these markers. I need to know where this came from.

Why?

A pause. The three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again. Marcus was typing something long.

Okay. I'm going to assume this is real and not some kind of elaborate prank, because if it's a prank it's a really cruel one.

The haplogroup is legitimate—J-M267, common enough in Middle Eastern populations. But these seven anomalous markers they're calling "SNG-1 through SNG-7"... Jeremy, I've never seen anything like them. Not in any database. Not in any literature. These markers shouldn't exist.

Jeremy's throat tightened. He typed: *Could it be faked?*

Faked how? To fake a genetic profile like this, you'd need access to synthesis equipment worth millions, plus the expertise to engineer novel genetic sequences that pass analysis protocols. And why would anyone bother? There's no commercial value in fake ancestry markers.

I'd have to see the raw data to be sure. But if this is real—if someone actually has these markers—it's the find of the century. These are completely unique. We're talking about genetic sequences that exist nowhere else in the human population.

Another message, seconds later:

Ran a search through the NCBI database. 47 million sequences. Zero matches for any of these seven markers. ZERO. Do you understand what that means? These alleles don't exist in modern humans. They're not in the 1000 Genomes Project. They're not in gnomAD. They're not in any ancient DNA database I have access to.

Then:

The only way someone could have these markers is if they're descended from a population that's been completely isolated for... I don't even know. Thousands of years? Or from an ancient lineage we've never identified. This isn't unusual, Jeremy. This is scientifically impossible.

Jeremy stared at the screen. Marcus wasn't prone to exaggeration. The man published in peer-reviewed journals. He'd debunked three different commercial DNA testing companies for inflated ancestry claims. He'd once called a \$200 million biotech startup "genetic astrology dressed up in lab coats."

And now he was using words like "impossible."

Impossible.

The word triggered something. A memory from 2003, the year Joslyn was born. She'd been two months premature, lungs underdeveloped, and then the meningitis hit. Four doctors had stood in the hallway, showing him and Elizabeth—his wife then, his ex-wife now—the scans. *"The bacteria has entered the brain cavity. Even if she survives, there will be significant cognitive impairment. You should prepare yourselves."*

He'd sat in the NICU for three days, holding his daughter's tiny hand through the plastic of the incubator, praying to a God he wasn't sure he believed in. And then, on the morning of the fourth

day, the chief pediatrician had come in looking like he'd seen a ghost. *"We ran the tests again. The scans are clear. The bacteria is gone. I've been practicing medicine for thirty years, and I have no explanation for what I'm seeing."*

They'd called it a miracle. Jeremy had called it good medicine and statistical anomaly. But he'd never forgotten the doctor's face. The same expression Marcus would probably have if he saw these results in person.

These alleles don't exist in modern humans.

Maybe they didn't. Or maybe they existed in exactly one family. One bloodline. Protected by something that couldn't be measured or replicated or peer-reviewed.

| *Who are you related to?*

Jeremy didn't answer. Couldn't answer. How do you tell a geneticist friend that your dead father claimed you're descended from Jesus Christ?

Another message from Marcus:

| *Seriously. If this is legitimate, we need to talk. This could rewrite what we know about human genetic diversity. I want to run my own analysis. Can you get me a sample?*

Jeremy pocketed the phone without responding. His hands were trembling slightly.

Marcus wasn't a believer. Marcus wasn't part of any secret society. Marcus was a scientist who spent his career calling out bullshit in the genetics industry.

And Marcus was confused. Genuinely confused. Because the data in his father's report was something he'd never seen before.

That doesn't prove anything, Jeremy told himself. *It just proves the report is unusual.*

But the skeptic's playbook was starting to fail him. Unusual reports could be forged. But forged reports didn't confuse real scientists. Fraudsters made mistakes—they got the methodology wrong, they used outdated marker designations, they included sequences that were too perfect, too clean.

This report had confused a working geneticist at a major university.

Show me carbon dating from an independent university, Jeremy thought. Show me peer-reviewed journals. Show me something I can verify.

But even as the skeptic in him dismissed the documents, the entrepreneur noticed the details. The laboratory accreditation numbers on the Chronos report were real—he'd verified similar credentials for biotech startups. The methodology section read like something from a Nature journal, not a conspiracy theory website. And his father had documented three independent labs, three different testing methods.

That wasn't the behavior of a delusional man. That was the behavior of someone who *expected* not to be believed.

"Show me DNA. Show me carbon dating. Not old papers." The words echoed in his mind. But his father, it seemed, had anticipated exactly that objection.

Three: A list of names and addresses. Some were crossed out in red ink. Others circled. At the bottom, a note in his father's handwriting: *If I die under suspicious circumstances, these are the Brothers who can protect you. Go to Davenport first.*

Four: A USB drive, labeled simply: *PROOF*.

Five: A modern smartphone, an iPhone 8, charged and powered on. A single app was open: an encrypted messaging platform Jeremy recognized from his tech days. One conversation thread, with a contact labeled "M.W. Davenport." The last message, sent by his father three weeks before his death:

They know. Sangreal Protocol active. If anything happens to me, the package goes to my son.

The response, sent ten minutes later:

Understood. We will watch for him. Lux e tenebris.

Light from darkness.

Jeremy was reading the messages when the phone buzzed in his hand. A new message:

Jeremy Schoemaker. We've been waiting for you. Do not return to your mother's house. They are watching it. Get in your car and drive to the Masonic Center in Davenport. 511 Veterans Memorial Parkway. Come now. You have been followed since you left Rock Island.

Jeremy's heart hammered against his ribs.

He shoved everything into his backpack and moved toward the vault door—

—and froze.

Voices. From the main floor. Raised. Urgent. Italian.

"Dov'e? Where is he?"

Janet's voice, trembling: "I don't know what you're talking about. We don't have a customer by that name—"

"The vault. NOW."

Heavy footsteps. Coming closer.

Jeremy's eyes swept the vault. No windows. One door. The same door those footsteps were approaching.

Thirty seconds. Maybe less.

He spotted it—a maintenance hatch in the ceiling, barely visible behind a row of safety deposit boxes. Emergency access for repairs.

The footsteps stopped. Just outside the vault door.

A voice—cold, accented, terrifyingly calm: “Mr. Schoemaker. We know you’re in there. Step out with your hands visible, and this can end peacefully.”

Jeremy was already climbing.

* * *

CHAPTER 4: THE GUARDIAN'S

BURDEN

Vatican City

November 8, 2020

4:17 AM



The leather journal felt heavier tonight.

Cardinal Enzo Rossini sat at his desk in the windowless office beneath the Vatican, turning the worn pages with fingers that had grown too familiar with their contents. Each name written in his

own careful script. Each date a wound that would never fully heal. Seventeen entries spanning four decades, each one representing a life ended by his command.

The eighteenth space remained blank. For now.

He closed the journal and pressed his palms flat against the mahogany surface, willing his hands to stop trembling. They rarely did anymore. Not since Buenos Aires. Not since he had learned to carry the weight.

But tonight was different.

Jeremy Schoemaker had escaped Cordova.

* * *

Rossini rose and crossed to the small altar in the corner of his office. A single candle burned before a crucifix his grandmother had carried from Naples when she fled the war, the same crucifix that had watched over his ordination, his elevation to monsignor, his appointment as Cardinal, and now his stewardship of the Custodes Fidei.

He knelt on the cold stone, his knees protesting the way they always did, and began to pray.

Not for guidance. He had stopped asking for that years ago. God had made His expectations clear through the Church, and the Church had spoken: the bloodline must end. There was no room for doubt in that equation, no space for hesitation.

He prayed instead for strength. For the clarity to do what must be done. And for the souls of those he had already sent to meet their Maker.

“Maria Theresa Desmond,” he whispered, beginning the litany he recited every night. “Forgive me. Wilhelm Brenner. Forgive me. The Desrosiers family, Pierre, Marguerite, their children Luc and Celeste. Forgive me.”

Seventeen names. Seventeen prayers. He never forgot a single one.

* * *

The phone on his desk buzzed.

“Report,” he said.

The voice on the other end was his chief operative in America, a former intelligence officer who had found a more righteous calling. “Schoemaker reached Davenport. The Masonic network is protecting him.”

Rossini’s grip tightened on the receiver. “The documents?”

“He has them. DNA analysis, Vatican archive copies, the journal coordinates.”

Naples, 1955. His father kneeling in the street, Communist partisans circling. *Renounce your God*. His father’s refusal. The gunshot. His mother’s scream. Three-year-old Enzo watching from behind the seamstress’s cart.

Without God, men become monsters. His mother had repeated it like a prayer. She had been right.

“Continue,” Rossini said.

“We lost three men in the pursuit. If he deciphers the coordinates—”

“He will.” Rossini stared at the surveillance photographs spread across his desk. “This one is not like the others.”

Argentina, 1987. His first order. Maria Theresa Desmond—a mathematics teacher who attended Mass every Sunday. She never knew the blood in her veins connected her to a two-thousand-year-old secret.

Rossini had signed the paper on a Tuesday. By Sunday, she was dead.

He had vomited for three days. Cardinal Mancini found him hollow-eyed, shaking. *The weight is heaviest at first. You will learn to carry it. You must.*

Seventeen names later, he had learned.

“What are your orders, Eminence?”

Rossini looked at the photographs more closely. Jeremy Schoemaker smiling at a tech conference. Visiting a children’s hospital. Coaching his daughter’s softball team. A man who had built schools in Africa, funded medical research, dedicated his fortune to helping others.

“In another life,” Rossini murmured, “we might have been allies.”

“Eminence?”

But that was not the world God had given them.

“Increase the team,” Rossini said, his voice hardening. “Double the resources. Whatever it takes to intercept him before he reaches Chicago.” He paused, his fingers finding his mother’s rosary. “And begin comprehensive surveillance on the daughters. Juliet and Joslyn. I want to know where they are at every moment.”

“Understood. And if the primary elimination fails?”

Rossini stared at the photograph of the two girls, their faces bright with youth and innocence. Juliet, seventeen, with her mother’s eyes and her father’s stubborn jaw. Joslyn, fifteen, still more child than woman, her smile untouched by the darkness that hunted her bloodline.

“Then we leverage them,” he said, the words ash in his mouth. “The bloodline must end. Whatever it costs.”

He terminated the call before the operative could respond.

The leather journal lay open on his desk, the blank space beneath the seventeenth name waiting to be filled. Tomorrow, perhaps. Or the day after. Whenever Jeremy Schoemaker’s luck finally ran out.

Rossini rose and returned to the altar, kneeling once more before his grandmother's crucifix.

"Forgive me, Lord," he whispered. "Forgive me for what I have done. Forgive me for what I must do."

He bowed his head and began to pray.

His phone buzzed again. A secure message from his Berlin contact—the one embedded inside the Grand Lodge of Iowa.

URGENT: Schoemaker being initiated into First Degree tonight. Brennan is his sponsor. They plan to move him to Chicago after the ceremony. Newberry Library. I have the coordinates.

Rossini stared at the message for a long moment. Then he smiled—a thin, cold thing that never reached his eyes.

The Masons thought their network was impenetrable. They were wrong.

He had been planting operatives inside Masonic lodges for twenty-three years. Patiently. Methodically. Men who took the oaths, learned the secrets, rose through the degrees—all while reporting everything to Rome.

The Brotherhood believed they were protecting Schoemaker.

They had no idea they were delivering him.

* * *

CHAPTER 5: THE

ESCAPE



Jeremy dropped from the maintenance hatch onto the bank's flat roof, his backpack slamming against his spine, two thousand years of secrets threatening to spill across the gravel.

Below, shouts. Someone had found the open hatch.

He ran.

His father's phone buzzed:

Black SUV, Chevy Suburban, three cars back. Do not acknowledge that you see them. Continue to Davenport. We have people en route to intercept.

Jeremy's eyes flicked up. There. Black Suburban. Keeping perfect pace.

His knuckles blanched against the wheel.

River Road stretched ahead. Two lanes. The Mississippi churning dark and cold to his left. A few trucks. A minivan with kids.

And the Suburban. Patient. Waiting.

Another buzz:

In two miles, gravel road on your right. Old boat launch. Closed. Turn in fast, lights off. Do exactly as I say.

Jeremy's mouth went dry. He'd built websites. Closed million-dollar deals. Spoken to crowds of thousands.

Never been hunted.

There. A gap in the trees. Rusted sign: *LECLAIRE LANDING—CLOSED.*

Jeremy killed his lights, cranked the wheel hard right.

The Camry's tires spat gravel as he skidded onto the side road, branches scraping the windows. He accelerated down the narrow track, praying he wouldn't hit a tree, couldn't see more than twenty feet ahead—

—and then the track opened up into a small clearing by the river. An old boat ramp descended into black water. And parked at the top of the ramp, headlights blazing directly at Jeremy, was a motorcycle.

No, two motorcycles.

Both riders wore full helmets and leather jackets. Both had sidearms visible in shoulder holsters.

Jeremy slammed on the brakes.

Behind him, the Suburban's engine roared. They'd seen the turnoff.

One of the motorcycle riders walked toward Jeremy's car, moving with military precision. Jeremy rolled down his window.

"Amulet," the rider said. Female voice, calm, authoritative. "Show me."

Jeremy held up the brass pendant.

The woman nodded. "Out of the car. Now. Bring the backpack, leave everything else."

"Who are you?"

"Someone who's trying to keep you alive. Move!"

Headlights appeared at the far end of the gravel road. The Suburban.

Jeremy grabbed his backpack and ran to the second motorcycle. The rider—male, built like a linebacker—gestured to the seat behind him.

"Hold on tight," he said. "And pray I'm as good at this as I think I am."

Both bikes screamed to life.

They shot forward, not back toward the road but down the boat ramp, onto the frozen grass alongside the river. Jeremy's bike tilted at a terrifying angle as they carved around trees, the Mississippi a dark void to their left. Behind them, the Suburban couldn't follow, too wide, too heavy for the terrain.

Jeremy heard shouting. A sharp crack—a gunshot.

But the motorcycles were already a hundred yards away, racing along a narrow path that hugged the riverbank. They rode for what felt like an eternity but was probably only ten minutes, until they reached another parking area, this one with a truck waiting.

“In,” the woman said, pulling off her helmet. She was in her forties, African American, with sharp, intelligent eyes and a scar across her left cheek. “They’ll regroup, probably call in backup. We need to get you inside the Lodge before they track us again.”

Jeremy climbed into the truck bed, which had been converted into a secure compartment with bench seating. The woman got in with him while the male rider secured the motorcycles to a trailer hitch.

As she settled onto the bench across from him, something clicked in Jeremy’s memory. A photograph on his father’s desk, years ago. His dad standing with a group of people outside what looked like a military hospital. Jeremy had asked about it once —“*Who are these people, Dad?*”—and his father had given him a strange look. “*People I trust with my life. And someday, with yours.*” Then he’d changed the subject so abruptly that Jeremy had felt embarrassed for asking.

The woman in the photograph had been younger. No scar yet. But those eyes—intelligent, assessing, missing nothing—were the same.

Dad knew her. Dad TRUSTED her. Years before any of this started.

How deep did this go? How long had his father been preparing for this moment?

As the truck pulled onto the highway, Jeremy sat in the darkness of the compartment, his breathing still ragged, and tried to make sense of what was happening to him.

Think, he told himself. You’re an entrepreneur. You’ve built companies on analyzing information. So analyze.

He forced his racing mind to slow down. To consider the possibilities rationally, the way he would evaluate a questionable business deal.

Possibility one: Dad was mentally ill.

It wasn't unreasonable. His father had been on immunosuppressants for thirty years—drugs known to cause neurological side effects. Depression, anxiety, even psychosis in rare cases. Cyclosporine alone could cause tremors, confusion, even visual hallucinations at high doses. And that was just one of the twelve medications his father had taken daily since 1988.

Jeremy had read the medical literature once, years ago, when his father's doctors had discussed switching his anti-rejection protocol. The long-term cognitive effects were sobering. White matter lesions. Accelerated brain aging. Increased risk of vascular dementia. His father had beaten the odds on his heart, but what about his brain?

Maybe in his final years, isolation and mortality had triggered something. A grandiose delusion. A break from reality. He wouldn't be the first dying man to convince himself his life had cosmic significance.

The Messiah complex, Jeremy thought. That's what they call it. People who believe they've been chosen for a divine purpose.

It was a recognized psychiatric phenomenon. And what could be more grandiose than believing you were descended from Jesus Christ himself? His father had spent three decades cheating death—maybe he'd started to believe there was a reason. That he'd been kept alive for something important. That his borrowed time meant something.

Possibility two: The Masons are a cult, and they indoctrinated him.

Jeremy had always been skeptical of the Masons. All those secret rituals, the hierarchy of degrees, the blood oaths. Sure, they claimed to be a charitable fraternity, but so did Scientology. What

if the Davenport Lodge was some kind of splinter group? A sect within a sect, feeding each other's delusions about sacred bloodlines and divine ancestry?

It happened. Smart people joined cults all the time. Doctors, lawyers, engineers—people who should know better. The techniques were well-documented: love bombing, gradual escalation, sunk-cost psychology. You start with charitable pancake breakfasts and funny handshakes. A few years later, you're convinced you're guarding the blood of Christ.

His father could have spent forty years marinating in their mythology until he couldn't distinguish fact from ritual fantasy. Each degree of initiation revealed new "secrets." Each secret made him feel more special, more chosen, more essential. By the time he reached the highest levels, he'd been so thoroughly programmed that a fairy tale about Mary Magdalene felt like revealed truth.

These people prey on lonely men, Jeremy thought bitterly. *Men looking for meaning. Men who want to believe their lives matter.*

His father had fit the profile perfectly.

Possibility three: This is an elaborate inheritance scam.

He'd seen variations of this before—the "Nigerian prince" model, scaled up. Someone targets a wealthy family, fabricates an elaborate backstory about secret inheritance or hidden treasure, then bleeds the marks dry with "fees" and "bribes" and "expenses." Maybe someone had identified his father as a vulnerable target—elderly, lonely, obsessed with genealogy—and constructed this entire bloodline mythology to extract money from him. The Swiss lab reports, the ancient documents, all of it could be forgeries designed to keep the scam running.

Possibility four: I'm being set up.

For what, he couldn't imagine. But Jeremy had made enemies in business. Competitors he'd beaten. Partners he'd walked away from. Maybe someone was orchestrating an elaborate frame—get-

ting him caught with forged documents, photographed with Masonic symbols, recorded making wild claims about being descended from Jesus Christ. One viral video of “Tech Millionaire Claims to Be Christ’s Heir” and his reputation would be destroyed forever.

The truck hit a bump, jostling him against the metal wall of the compartment. Jeremy steadied himself and kept thinking.

What’s the common thread?

In every scenario—mental illness, cult indoctrination, scam, setup—the common assumption was that the bloodline claims were false. That his father had been deceived or had deceived himself. That there was no sacred lineage, no Vatican assassins, no ancient secret worth protecting.

But that doesn’t explain the men at Mom’s house.

Scammers didn’t send armed teams. Cults didn’t coordinate international surveillance operations. Mental illness couldn’t account for the men in the bank vault, the Suburban chase, the professional extraction he’d just experienced.

Someone is spending real resources on this. A lot of resources.

Jeremy had raised millions in venture capital. He knew what serious money looked like. Helicopters and assault teams and international coordination—that wasn’t the behavior of con artists or cultists. That was the behavior of an organization with deep pockets and deeper motives.

He pulled out his phone and started making a list. Notes to himself. Things he would verify independently before believing anything:

1. Chronos Genomics, Zurich – is it a real lab?
2. The DNA methodology – does it match current scientific standards?
3. The Shroud of Turin fragment – can its provenance be verified?

4. The seven SNG markers – do they appear in any public database?
5. The Custodes Fidei – any historical evidence of their existence?
6. His own DNA – can he get an independent test?

I will verify everything, he promised himself. Every claim. Every document. Every supposed fact.

He wasn't going to accept this on faith. He wasn't going to trust robed men in secret lodges or ancient amulets passed down through generations. He was going to treat this like a hostile acquisition—assume everyone was lying until they proved otherwise.

If this is real, the evidence will hold up to scrutiny.

If it's not, I'll find the fraud.

Either way, he would know the truth.

As they pulled onto the highway, headed for Davenport, the woman extended her hand.

“Crawford. Captain, U.S. Army, retired.” Her handshake was brief, professional. “Security for the Lodge. Your father pulled me out of Kabul in oh-nine. I owe him.”

Jeremy shook her hand. “My father was in Kabul?”

“State Department, officially. Other things, not.” Crawford's jaw tightened. “Your daughters. Lincoln. Two men in clerical collars have been asking questions at their school.”

Jeremy's blood turned to ice. “My daughters—”

Crawford held up a hand. “Watching. Not acting. Yet.” Her voice was clipped, tactical. “We have Brothers on them. But understand this: the Custodes don't just hunt the carrier. They eliminate the line.”

Jeremy's throat closed. Juliet. Joslyn. His little girls.

“Why didn't you lead with that?”

“Because I needed you thinking clearly, not panicking.” Crawford's jaw tightened. “Your daughters are safe—for now.”

“For now?”

“Forty-eight hours. Maybe less.” She checked her watch. “The Custodes move through diplomatic channels—Vatican passport holders, clergy on ‘missionary work.’ It takes time to mobilize a wet team without leaving a trail. Right now, they’ve got surveillance only. But they’re already activating assets in the Midwest. Once a full tactical unit reaches Lincoln...” She didn’t finish. She didn’t need to.

Forty-eight hours. His daughters’ lives, measured in minutes.

* * *

CHAPTER 6: THE

PROPHECY

St. Francis Heart Center, Peoria, Illinois

March 17, 1996 — 4:47 AM



Twenty-four years earlier

* * *

Jeremy Schoemaker had never believed in prophecies.

He was twenty-two years old, a computer science dropout who'd taught himself to code, and he believed in data. In algorithms. In the cold logic of ones and zeros. Prophecies were for gypsies and fortune cookies—entertainment for the credulous.

But sitting in the surgical waiting room at St. Francis Heart Center, watching the clock tick past 4:00 AM, Jeremy found himself thinking about his grandmother's story. The one she'd told at every family gathering since he was a child. The one everyone smiled politely at and then forgot.

The gypsy woman.

Mattie Tiedemann had been nineteen years old, walking through a carnival in Rock Island, when a woman in a faded shawl had grabbed her wrist. The woman's eyes, Mattie always said, were like looking into deep water—you couldn't see the bottom.

"You will live a long life," the gypsy had said. "Almost a century. You will see wonders. You will know joy."

Mattie had smiled, tried to pull away.

But the gypsy held tight.

"There is a price," she whispered. "You will bury all your children. Every one. Before your time comes, theirs will end."

Mattie Tiedemann was ninety-six years old now. She had outlived two of her four children—one to cancer, one to a car accident.

And Robert, Jeremy's father, was on an operating table fifteen feet away, his chest cracked open, a stranger's heart being sewn into his body.

* * *

The odds had never been in Robert's favor.

Eleven months ago, at fifty-one years old, Robert Schoemaker had collapsed in his driveway after mowing the lawn. Heart attack. Mild stroke. When the doctors at the Quad Cities hospital ran their tests, they found something that made them go quiet.

Myocardioathy. A virus—years old, maybe decades—had attacked Robert’s heart and caused it to swell to nearly twice its normal size. The muscle was failing. Had been failing, silently, for longer than anyone could explain.

“Honestly,” the cardiologist had said, “I don’t know how he’s still alive. This heart should have given out years ago.”

The only option was a transplant. A complete, full heart transplant—the riskiest procedure in cardiac medicine.

Robert was placed on the state transplant list with a one-in-twenty-five chance of surviving the entire process. One in twenty-five. Jeremy had done the math. Ninety-six percent chance of death.

But his father had smiled. “I’ve beaten worse odds, son. The universe isn’t done with me yet.”

* * *

The waiting had been the hardest part.

For eleven months and ten days, Robert Schoemaker lived on the cardiac ward at St. Francis, tethered to a machine that weighed four hundred pounds. The ventricular assist device—VAD, the nurses called it—was essentially a mechanical heart, pumping blood through his body while what remained of his own heart struggled to contribute.

Robert dragged that machine everywhere. To the bathroom. To the window. To the small chapel on the third floor where Jeremy sometimes found him in the early morning hours, a worn pocket Bible open on his knee.

“Praying?” Jeremy had asked once.

“Talking,” Robert replied. “To whoever’s listening.”

Two men shared the cardiac ward with Robert during those months. Fellow transplant candidates, waiting for the same miracle. Ed, a retired teacher from Springfield. Marcus, a truck driver

from Champaign.

Both received their transplants before Robert.

Both died on the operating table.

Jeremy watched his father absorb each death with a strange calm. "Their time," Robert said. "Not mine. Not yet."

* * *

The transplant list worked on a cruel timeline.

Patients started on their state list. After one year—365 days of waiting, of hoping, of watching others die—they moved to the national list. Hundreds of names ahead of them. Thousands. The odds dropped from slim to nearly impossible.

Robert Schoemaker was fifteen days from that deadline.

Fifteen days from his name dropping into an ocean of the desperate and dying, from position number two in Illinois to position number four hundred and something in America.

And then the call came.

3:17 AM, March 17, 1996. A twenty-three-year-old motorcycle accident victim in Chicago. Brain dead. Organs viable. Heart: a match.

The surgical team had been assembled within the hour. Robert was prepped by 4:00 AM. The last thing he said to Jeremy before they wheeled him through the double doors was: "Tell your grandmother I'll see her on the other side. Whichever side that is."

* * *

Jeremy stared at the clock. 4:47 AM. 4:48. 4:49.

The surgery was supposed to take four to six hours. They were barely an hour in.

Too soon for news. Unless the news was bad.

The door to the waiting room opened.

Dr. Harrison, the lead cardiac surgeon, walked in. His scrubs were spotted with blood. His face was gray.

Jeremy's mother stood. "Robert—"

"He flatlined," Dr. Harrison said. "During the transplant. The new heart wouldn't start. We tried electrical stimulation, drugs, everything. For almost three minutes, he was clinically dead."

Three minutes.

Jeremy felt the room tilt. His grandmother's words echoed in his skull: *You will bury all your children.*

"We were about to call time of death," Dr. Harrison continued. "And then—" He paused, shook his head like he still didn't believe what he was about to say. "One of our surgical techs, a young woman named Rivera, she refused to give up. She reached into his chest and started manually massaging the heart. Hand compressions, directly on the transplanted organ. It's not standard protocol. Frankly, it almost never works."

"Almost never?" Jeremy's mother whispered.

"It worked." Dr. Harrison's voice cracked. "The heart started beating. On its own. Strong and steady. We've closed him up. He's in recovery. He's... he's alive."

Jeremy collapsed into a chair.

Dead for three minutes. And then not.

* * *

Five hours later, the phone rang.

Jeremy answered. It was his aunt, calling from Rock Island.

"It's your grandmother," she said. "Mattie. She's gone. Passed in her sleep about an hour ago. Peacefully, the nurses said. Like she was waiting for something, and then she just... let go."

Jeremy looked at the clock. Did the math.

His grandmother had died at approximately 9:30 AM.

His father's heart had started beating again at approximately 4:50 AM.

Four and a half hours. That's how long Mattie Tiedemann had waited after her son's clinical death before she allowed herself to follow. Long enough to be sure. Long enough for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

You will bury all your children.

Technically, she had. For three minutes, Robert Schoemaker had been dead. The prophecy was complete.

And then something—someone—had intervened.

* * *

Robert Schoemaker did not just survive.

He thrived.

In the world of cardiac transplantation, the average survival rate beyond eight years is measured in single-digit percentages. The body's immune system treats the foreign heart as an invader, attacking it relentlessly. Rejection. Infection. Failure. Most transplant recipients live five to seven years if they're lucky.

Robert Schoemaker lived twenty-four years. Then twenty-five. Then thirty. He defied every statistical model in cardiac medicine.

But that's not the only miracle.

Fifteen years after his transplant, Robert's doctors discovered a problem. The aortic valve in his transplanted heart was failing. It needed to be replaced.

The procedure had never been done. Not successfully. Replacing a valve in a *transplanted* heart meant operating on tissue that was already fighting for survival, already compromised by years of immunosuppressive drugs, already operating on borrowed time.

"The rejection risk is too high," one surgeon said. "The mortality rate is essentially one hundred percent."

Robert smiled. "I've beaten those odds before."

He underwent the surgery. He survived. He became the first—and to date, only—human being to successfully receive a valve replacement on a fully transplanted heart.

The case was written up in medical journals around the world. Cardiologists from Tokyo to London studied his file, searching for an explanation.

They never found one.

* * *

Jeremy opened his eyes.

He was still in the back of Crawford's SUV, hurtling through the Iowa night toward Davenport. His father's amulet burned warm against his chest. The memory of that hospital waiting room—of the gypsy's prophecy, of his father's impossible resurrection—felt more real than the highway lights streaming past the window.

Divine protection. That's what his grandmother had believed. What his father had believed.

Maybe it was time Jeremy started believing too.

* * *

CHAPTER 7: THE

BROTHERHOOD

The Grand Lodge of Iowa

Davenport, Iowa



The Grand Lodge building was a magnificent structure from 1912, all limestone and marble, with columns that would have looked at home in ancient Rome. Jeremy had driven past it a hundred times growing up and never given it a second thought.

Now it looked like a fortress.

And suddenly, standing on the steps, Jeremy remembered.

He was seven years old. His father had brought him here on some errand—picking up regalia for a ceremony, maybe, or attending some meeting. Jeremy had waited in the lobby, bored, and wandered off to explore. He'd found a staircase leading down. At the bottom was a door with strange symbols carved into it. He'd reached for the handle—

—and his father had appeared out of nowhere, gripping his shoulder hard enough to bruise, pulling him away. *“Not yet,”* his father had said, his voice strange and tight. *“Someday, Jeremy. But not yet.”*

Jeremy had asked what was down there. His father had knelt, looked him in the eyes, and said something that had made no sense at the time: *“Your inheritance. When you’re ready to carry it.”*

Thirty-seven years later, Jeremy understood. His father hadn't been talking about money or property. He'd been talking about this. About everything.

Crawford led him through a side entrance, up a narrow staircase, into a windowless room lined with portraits of Masonic leaders going back two centuries. A conference table dominated the center. Seated at it were five men and one woman, all older, all wearing the aprons and regalia of high-degree Masons.

At the head of the table sat a man in his seventies, silver-haired, with eyes that missed nothing. He stood when Jeremy entered.

“Jeremy Schoemaker. I'm Arthur Brennan, Worshipful Master of this Lodge and Commander in Chief of the Valley of Davenport Scottish Rite. Your father was my Brother, my friend, and my fellow guardian of the bloodline. Please, sit.”

Jeremy sat. Placed his backpack on the table. “Someone needs to tell me what the hell is going on. My father’s dead, I was just chased by armed men, and everyone keeps talking about a bloodline like it’s something out of *The Da Vinci Code*.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Brennan said quietly. “Dan Brown didn’t make it up, Mr. Schoemaker. He uncovered fragments of the truth and fictionalized them. But the core—the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child, that the bloodline survived, that powerful forces have spent two millennia trying to suppress this knowledge—that’s all real.”

He leaned forward. “Do you know what ‘Sangreal’ means? The word on your amulet?”

“Holy Grail. The cup from the Last Supper.”

“That’s what the Church wants you to believe. But break the word differently—not *San Greal*, Holy Grail, but *Sang Real*. Royal Blood.” Brennan’s eyes held Jeremy’s. “The Holy Grail was never a cup, Mr. Schoemaker. It was a person. Mary Magdalene. And the sacred bloodline she carried in her womb when she fled Jerusalem after the crucifixion. The chalice that held the blood of Christ wasn’t made of gold or silver. It was flesh and bone. And your family has carried that blood for two thousand years.”

“That’s insane.”

Jeremy pushed back from the table, shaking his head. “With all due respect, Mr. Brennan, this sounds like *Da Vinci Code* fan fiction. I mean, listen to yourself—sacred bloodlines, secret orders, Mary Magdalene fleeing Jerusalem with Christ’s child? There are entire websites dedicated to this stuff. Forums full of people who think they’re descended from Jesus because their grandmother’s maiden name was French.”

He gestured at the robed figures around the table. “My dad was a *Rotarian*. He was a Mason, sure, but he was also on the board of the local food bank. He coached my Little League team. He

watched *Jeopardy!* every night at seven o'clock. He wasn't a secret guardian of Christ's bloodline."

"I understand your skepticism—"

"Do you? Because I built three companies on separating reality from wishful thinking. I've seen a thousand pitches from people who *believed* in their product with absolute certainty—and ninety percent of them were wrong. Belief isn't evidence, Mr. Brennan. And right now, all I'm hearing is belief."

He leaned forward, hands flat on the table. "I made my first million selling digital advertising. You know what that requires? *Data*. Click-through rates. Conversion metrics. A/B testing until you know exactly which shade of blue makes people buy. I built my career on proving things work—not on faith, not on tradition, not on what some guy in a robe tells me is true." He gestured at the portraits on the walls. "So before I accept that my family tree goes back to the actual Son of God, I'm going to need more than atmosphere and history lessons. Show me data."

Brennan nodded slowly, as if he'd expected this. As if, perhaps, he'd even been waiting for it.

"Then let me show you some evidence."

He gestured to one of the other men, who placed a laptop on the table and turned it to face Jeremy. A news article from *The Guardian*, dated November 4, 2020, filled the screen:

***MYSTERIOUS FIRE DESTROYS ILLINOIS
FUNERAL HOME; ARSON SUSPECTED***

*Authorities investigating string of suspicious
fires at mortuaries across the Midwest*

Brennan clicked through several more articles. Over the past three years, authorities had investigated eleven fires at funeral homes in six states—all in the Midwest. Arson. No arrests. No pattern offi-

cially acknowledged, though the connection screamed from every headline.

“They’re hunting us,” Brennan said. “The Custodes Fidei, the Guardians of the Faith. An ancient order within the Vatican, older than the Jesuits, more secretive than Opus Dei. For two thousand years, they’ve maintained that Jesus was celibate, divine, not fully human. Any evidence to the contrary threatens the foundation of their power.”

“So they kill people? Burn down funeral homes?”

“They destroy DNA evidence. Erase bloodlines. Your father’s national recognition in the Masonic magazine drew their attention. They identified him as a potential carrier of the bloodline—we believe they have infiltrators in the genealogy databases, in the DNA testing companies. When your father died, they moved quickly to destroy any biological evidence.”

“But Bart Krebs saved the ashes.”

“A miracle.” The woman at the table leaned forward—sixties, wearing the regalia of the Order of the Eastern Star. “Or Providence. Your father’s DNA still exists. It can still be tested, verified, compared against the samples he left in Switzerland.”

Jeremy held up a hand. “Wait. Back up. You keep talking about DNA verification like it’s straightforward. How do you verify someone’s DNA is from Jesus Christ without a confirmed sample to compare it to? You don’t exactly have Jesus’s driver’s license on file.”

Brennan smiled grimly. “That’s the question, isn’t it? The question the Church hopes no one ever asks.” He nodded to the woman. “Sister Katherine, would you?”

Katherine touched a key on the laptop. A high-resolution image appeared—yellowed fabric, woven in a distinctive herringbone pattern. The Shroud of Turin.

“Medieval forgery,” Jeremy said flatly. “Carbon-dated to 1260–1390. Oxford, Zurich, Arizona. It was front-page news. I don’t need thirty seconds on Google to know that.”

Brennan and Katherine exchanged a look. Neither seemed surprised.

A door cracked open at the back of the room. Crawford slipped in, weapon holstered but hand resting on it. “Perimeter clear. Two unmarked cars on Brady Street. Brothers tagged them. Continue.”

She slipped back out. Jeremy turned back to the table.

“The fragment is in a secure vault in Geneva,” Katherine said. “For obvious reasons, we don’t transport it.”

“Convenient.”

“Necessary.” Katherine’s voice was patient, as if she’d had this conversation many times before. “But I can show you something else. The 1988 carbon dating—you’re right that it was conducted rigorously. What the BBC article doesn’t mention is *where* on the Shroud the sample was taken.”

She clicked to a new image: a diagram of the Shroud with a small section highlighted in red at one corner.

“The sample came from here,” she said, pointing. “A corner that had been repaired multiple times over the centuries. After a fire in 1532, Poor Clare nuns patched damaged sections using thread from their own era—medieval thread woven into the original fabric using a technique called invisible reweaving.”

“That sounds like an excuse.”

“It sounds like an excuse because the Church has deliberately avoided retesting.” Katherine’s eyes were sharp. “In 2005, a chemist named Raymond Rogers—a member of the original STURP research team and a known skeptic of the Shroud’s authenticity—published a peer-reviewed paper in *Thermochimica Acta*. He analyzed threads from the 1988 sample and found cotton

fibers and a madder root dye that weren't present anywhere else on the Shroud. The 1988 sample was contaminated. The corner was not original to the main cloth."

"And nobody retested?"

"The Vatican has blocked every subsequent request." Katherine's voice hardened. "Ask yourself why. If the 1988 dating is definitive, why not retest from an uncontaminated section and settle the matter forever? Why guard that fabric like it contains the secrets of the universe?"

Jeremy sat in silence for a moment, processing. He'd expected to demolish their argument with thirty seconds of Googling. Instead, he'd learned that the scientific debate was messier than the headlines suggested.

That doesn't make it real, he reminded himself. *It just means the debunking is incomplete.*

"Fine," he said. "Show me what you have."

"In 1898," Katherine said, "an Italian photographer named Secondo Pia took the first photographs of the Shroud. What he discovered—the negative image, the anatomical precision—became front-page news worldwide. What the newspapers never reported was that three Brothers of our order were present that night. When Pia lifted the Shroud for repositioning, a fragment broke free from the edge. Degraded linen, perhaps two centimeters square. Our Brothers... secured it."

"You stole a piece of the Shroud of Turin."

"We preserved evidence that would otherwise have been destroyed or hidden away in Vatican vaults forever." Katherine clicked to the next image—a DNA analysis chart covered in colored bands and numerical sequences. "This fragment has been analyzed six times over the past century, using progressively more sophisticated techniques. The DNA is degraded but extractable. And it shows something remarkable."

She pointed to a highlighted section. “Y-chromosome haplogroup J-M267. Common enough in Middle Eastern populations—about fifteen percent of Jewish men carry it. But the Shroud sample contains seven additional markers we’ve designated the ‘Sangreal anomalies.’ These markers appear in no other human sample ever tested. Not in any database. Not in any population study. They’re unique.”

Jeremy leaned forward, studying the chart with the same intensity he’d once applied to server logs and code repositories.

Brennan answered the question Jeremy was already forming. “Three independent labs. Chronos Genomics in Zurich, Max Planck in Leipzig, a private lab in Jerusalem. All blind samples. All identical results. Thirty years, no whistleblower.” He shook his head. “At some point, the conspiracy required to fake this becomes more implausible than the thing itself.”

Jeremy’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced down. A text from a number he didn’t recognize: *Brothers on station Lincoln. Girls in bed. House quiet. — D.C. Crawford.* The fist around his ribs eased a fraction.

“The 1988 carbon sample was taken from a corner that had been repaired with medieval thread after a fire in 1532,” Brennan continued. “Contaminated. Later studies using vanillin decay and spectroscopy date the main fabric to between 50 BCE and 100 CE. Our fragment came from an uncontaminated section.”

Katherine clicked again. Two DNA profiles appeared side by side.

“On the left, the Shroud fragment markers. On the right...” She paused. “Your father’s DNA.”

Jeremy stared at the screen. The seven anomalous markers lined up perfectly. Identical peaks. Identical sequences.

“It’s not just that you’re from the Middle East, Mr. Schoemaker,” Katherine said quietly. “It’s that you share markers with a sample that carbon-dates to 30 AD, plus or minus

fifty years. Markers that exist nowhere else on Earth. Markers that should be statistically impossible.”

“How impossible?”

“The probability of this match being coincidental?” Katherine met his eyes. “One in four point seven trillion.”

Jeremy sat back. The number hung in the air like a verdict.

For a long moment, he said nothing. His mind—the same mind that had debugged server farms, analyzed market data, built algorithms to predict user behavior—ran the numbers again. And again.

Four point seven trillion.

“The SNG markers,” he said slowly. “These seven anomalies. They don’t appear anywhere else? Not in any database worldwide?”

“Nowhere,” Katherine confirmed. “We’ve searched every major genomic database—23andMe’s anonymized data, the UK Biobank, the Genographic Project, academic research archives going back decades. These markers are absent from modern human populations. Entirely absent.”

“Except in ancient Levantine samples,” Brennan added quietly. “Samples from first-century Judea.”

Jeremy stared at the two DNA profiles side by side. The identical peaks. The matching sequences. Seven markers that shouldn’t exist in any living human—and yet there they were, in his father’s blood. In *his* blood.

He thought of every objection he’d raised. The medieval documents could be forged. The lab reports could be bought. Chain of custody could be fabricated. But this—seven unique genetic markers, verified across multiple independent labs, matching samples from two thousand years ago—this wasn’t something you could fake. Not without rewriting the fundamental rules of human genetics.

The data doesn’t lie.

It was what he'd told a hundred clients, a hundred investors, a hundred employees. Data could be misinterpreted. Data could be incomplete. But raw data—properly collected, properly verified—didn't lie.

And this data said he was something that shouldn't be possible.

"Okay," Jeremy heard himself say. His voice sounded strange, distant. "Okay. I believe you."

Brennan's eyes softened. "It takes time to—"

"No. I'm not having a crisis of faith here." Jeremy met the old man's gaze. "I'm a tech guy. I believe in evidence. And this is evidence. Seven markers that exist nowhere else on Earth, matching across independent samples and independent labs." He exhaled slowly. "Either this is the most elaborate fraud in human history, or... or it's real."

"And if it's real?"

Jeremy looked at the laptop screen. At the genetic proof of something he'd dismissed as Dan Brown fiction just hours ago. "Then I need to understand what I'm supposed to do about it."

Jeremy pulled out the USB drive. "He left this. Labeled 'Proof.'"

Brennan took the drive, inserted it into the laptop. The screen filled with files:

- DNA analysis reports
- High-resolution scans of the ancient journal
- Photographs of medieval manuscripts from archives in France, Italy, and Jerusalem
- A video file, dated October 15, 2020

Brennan opened the video.

Jeremy's father appeared on screen, sitting in what looked like a Lodge temple room, wearing his Masonic apron.

“Jeremy, if you’re watching this, then my suspicions were correct. They’ve found me. By now you’ve read my letter, you’ve seen the documents, and you’re probably sitting in the Grand Lodge in Davenport with Arthur and the others.”

On screen, Robert Schoemaker smiled sadly.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this. But you were always meant to be the one to carry this forward. Not because you’re special, though you are. Not because you’re smarter than Andrea, though you might be. But because you left. You built a life beyond the reach of those who would control you, monitor you, silence you.”

His father paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was different. Harder. More direct.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. You’re sitting there right now with that look on your face—the one you used to get when I tried to explain why the Huskers were going to have a good season. The skeptical look. The ‘prove it’ look.”

On screen, Robert Schoemaker leaned forward, as if speaking directly to his son across the divide of death.

“You think this is bullshit. I know you do. You’ve probably already Googled everything. Priory of Sion hoax. Shroud of Turin debunked. Da Vinci Code fraud. You’ve read the Wikipedia articles. You’ve seen the carbon dating results. And you’re

sitting there thinking: Dad finally lost his mind. Thirty years of immunosuppressants, and the old man went off the deep end.”

Jeremy felt a chill run down his spine. It was like his father could see him.

“So here’s what I want you to do. Don’t believe a damn word any of these people tell you. Don’t trust Arthur. Don’t trust the documents. Don’t trust anything you’ve seen tonight.”

Brennan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The other Masons exchanged glances.

“Instead, VERIFY it. Take your own DNA to Chronos Genomics in Zurich. Walk in cold. Don’t tell them who you are or why you’re there. Pay cash. Use a fake name. Get your own analysis done from scratch.”

Robert Schoemaker’s eyes were intense now, boring into the camera.

“Then do the same thing at two other labs—any labs you choose, anywhere in the world. Pick them yourself. Don’t let the Masons recommend them. Don’t let anyone influence your choice. Just... test it. Like you’d test any claim in business. Like you’d verify any data before making a million-dollar decision.”

He sat back slightly.

“If I’m wrong—if this is all delusion and forgery—those tests will prove it. Three independent labs, three different countries, and you’ll have your answer. You can walk away knowing your old man was crazy, and that’ll be the end of it.”

A pause. Then, softer:

“But if I’m right... if those markers show up in your blood the way they showed up in mine... then you’ll have proof you generated yourself. Proof that doesn’t depend on trusting me, or the Masons, or anyone else. Proof that belongs to you.”

Jeremy stared at the screen. His father—the man who had raised him on skepticism, on ‘trust but verify,’ on never accepting anything at face value—was giving him exactly what he needed. Not faith. Not belief. An invitation to test.

“That’s all I’m asking, son. Don’t believe. VERIFY. And then decide for yourself what it means.”

The video continued:

“The Freemasons have protected the bloodline for centuries. We’re not perfect. We’re not magical. But we’re a network, a brotherhood that spans the globe, bound by oaths that mean something. When you join us—and you will join us, Jeremy, you’ll need to for your own protection—you’ll gain access to resources, to safe houses, to Brothers who will die to keep you safe.”

“The amulet you’re wearing—yes, I know you’re wearing it, you’d be stupid not to—contains encoded information. The symbols on its face cor-

respond to four locations where we've hidden additional proof. Chicago, Rome, Jerusalem, and Hamburg—the city where Jacob Tiedemann left to come to America in 1838.”

“Your mission, should you choose to accept it —” Robert Schoemaker actually smiled at his own Mission: Impossible reference “—is to gather the proof from all four locations, compile it into an unassailable case, and release it to the world. We call it the Sangreal Protocol—the procedure for revealing the truth about the royal blood. Not to prove that you’re descended from Jesus—who cares about that, really? But to prove that the Church has been lying for two thousand years. To prove that Jesus was human, that he loved, that he had a family. To reclaim his humanity.”

“It won’t be safe. The Custodes Fidei will try to stop you. But you’re not alone. You have the Masons. You have the network. And you have something they don’t: you have the truth on your side.”

“I love you, son. Make me proud.”

The video ended.

Don’t believe. VERIFY.

The words echoed in Jeremy’s mind. His father hadn’t asked him to accept any of this on faith. He’d given him a roadmap to test every claim independently. It was the opposite of what cults did, the opposite of what scammers did. They demanded trust. His father had demanded skepticism.

That’s what convinced me, Jeremy realized. Not the DNA profiles. Not the statistics. Not the robed figures and ancient amulets.

It was the invitation to doubt. The insistence that he prove it wrong if he could.

Jeremy sat in silence. His father had survived twenty-four years with a transplanted heart—the longest in recorded medical history. Doctors called it impossible. Yet here Jeremy stood, descendant of that impossible survival, recipient of too many near-deaths to count.

The bloodline protects itself, his father had said.

Coincidence? Or something more?

He looked at Arthur Brennan.

“How do I join the Freemasons?”

Before Brennan could answer, a phone buzzed. Crawford checked it, and her face went hard.

“We have a problem,” she said. “Perimeter alarm. Three vehicles just pulled up outside. Black sedans. Diplomatic plates.”

The woman from the Eastern Star stood abruptly. “They found us? Here? That’s impossible.”

“Not impossible,” Brennan said grimly. “Fast. Faster than we expected.” He turned to Jeremy. “They must have tracked you from your mother’s house.”

Mom. Jeremy’s stomach dropped.

“Is she safe?” he demanded.

“We have Brothers watching her,” Crawford said.

“And my daughters?” The words came out sharper than he intended. “In Lincoln?”

“We’ve already dispatched Brothers to watch your family,” Brennan said quietly. “Your wife in Dallas. Your daughters in Lincoln. Around the clock.”

Jeremy stared at him. “You’re already watching them? Since when?”

“Since the moment we learned your father was ill. The Custodes Fidei don’t just hunt individuals, Mr. Schoemaker. They eliminate bloodlines.” Brennan’s eyes were grave. “Your daughters

carry the same blood you do. The same markers. They are every bit as valuable—and every bit as much at risk.”

The words landed like a physical blow. Juliet. Joslyn. Not just his little girls anymore. Targets.

“But right now, we need to get *you* out,” Crawford said, drawing her sidearm. “There’s a tunnel in the basement that leads to the river. Move. Now.”

Jeremy grabbed the laptop, the USB drive, everything he could carry.

Above them, someone began pounding on the Lodge’s front door.

“How do I join the Freemasons?” Jeremy asked again, his voice steady despite the chaos.

Brennan smiled grimly as he led them toward the stairs. “Son, you just did.”

The front window exploded inward. Glass shrieked across the Lodge floor. A canister bounced twice and began spewing thick white smoke.

Crawford shoved Jeremy toward the basement door. “GO!”

Behind them, the front door splintered off its hinges.

* * *

PART TWO: THE PROOF

CHAPTER 8: THE

NEWBERRY CIPHER

Chicago, Illinois

November 10, 2020



The initiation had taken place over two nights. Jeremy Schoemaker was now an Entered Apprentice Mason, the first degree of three, and while he didn't yet understand all the symbolism

and ritual, he understood the bonds. The men who stood beside him now—Arthur Brennan, Denise Crawford, and two other Brothers he'd just met—would protect him with their lives.

And he might need them.

The first location encoded on the amulet was the Newberry Library in Chicago, one of the world's great independent research libraries, home to millions of rare books and manuscripts. According to his father's notes, a Masonic scholar in the 1920s had hidden certain documents in the library's collection, documents that proved the Tiedemann connection to the Merovingian bloodline.

But finding them wouldn't be simple. Heinrich Schoemaker had been paranoid—and with good reason. He hadn't left a straightforward map. He'd left a cipher.

"The symbols on the amulet," Jeremy said, studying the artifact under the weak November light filtering through the car windows. They were parked two blocks from the Newberry, in a loading zone behind a coffee shop. "My father's notes say they correspond to locations. But he didn't write down *how*."

Brennan leaned over from the passenger seat, examining the intricate engravings. The amulet's face bore a complex design: a chalice at the center, surrounded by a rose, enclosed within a Templar cross. But around the edges, almost invisible unless you knew to look, were smaller symbols. Geometric shapes. Lines and dots.

"Masonic cipher?" Crawford suggested from the driver's seat, her eyes scanning the street through the mirrors.

"No." Jeremy tilted the amulet, catching the light at different angles. "I've seen Masonic cipher. This is different. More... mathematical."

He pulled out his phone, opened his father's scanned notes, and scrolled through pages of cramped handwriting. Most of it was genealogical research—names, dates, marriage records. But near

the end, there was a page that had always puzzled him. A list of numbers, seemingly random:

944.025 T534 271.1 M478c 016.9 V582 929.72 S362

“Call numbers,” Jeremy breathed. “They’re Dewey Decimal call numbers.”

Brennan’s eyebrows rose. “Your father hid the location using library classification?”

“It’s perfect, actually. To anyone who doesn’t have this amulet, it’s just a random list of numbers. But if you know to look...” Jeremy traced the symbols on the amulet’s edge with his fingertip. “Each symbol corresponds to a digit. The rose with five petals—that’s a five. The triangle—three. The square—four.”

“How do you know the correlation?”

“Because my father taught me.” Jeremy’s voice caught slightly. “When I was twelve. He called it a game. Said it was an old family code, passed down through generations. I thought he was just being Dad—you know, making everything into a puzzle. But he was preparing me. For this.”

Crawford checked her watch. “Library opens in ten minutes. We should get in position.”

* * *

The Newberry Library occupied an entire block on West Walton Street, a Renaissance Revival masterpiece of granite and limestone that had stood since 1893. Jeremy had visited once before, years ago, researching a business book he’d never finished writing. He remembered the hushed reverence of the reading rooms, the smell of old paper and leather, the weight of accumulated knowledge pressing down from every shelf.

Today, it felt different. Today, every shadow might hide a threat.

They entered separately—Crawford first, establishing a perimeter; then Brennan, positioning himself near the main staircase; finally Jeremy, researcher's badge clipped to his jacket, notebook in hand, looking for all the world like any other academic pursuing some obscure historical question.

The Special Collections Reading Room occupied the third floor. Jeremy climbed the stairs slowly, forcing himself to match the unhurried pace of the scholars around him. His heart hammered against his ribs.

944.025 T534

He found the first call number in the European History section. A book called *The Merovingian Kings: A Study in Dynastic Succession*, published 1923, author listed as "Tiedemann, H."

Heinrich Tiedemann. His great-great-grandfather.

Jeremy's hands trembled as he pulled the volume from the shelf. It was a slim book, perhaps two hundred pages, bound in faded green cloth. He carried it to a reading table, sat down, and began to turn the pages.

Nothing. Just text. Dense academic prose about Frankish succession laws and royal genealogies. No hidden documents. No secret messages.

He checked the spine. The binding. The endpapers. Nothing.

Wrong book?

Jeremy pulled out his phone and looked at the call number again. *944.025 T534*. He'd found the right location. But maybe...

He returned to the shelf and looked more carefully. There, behind where the Tiedemann book had been, sat another volume. Same call number—but a different book entirely. *Tales of the Frankish Court*, author anonymous, no publication date visible.

Someone had mis-shelved it. Or hidden it.

Jeremy pulled out the second book. It was heavier than it looked, the binding oddly thick. He ran his fingers along the spine, feeling for irregularities—and found them. The leather was lumpy,

misshapen, as if something had been sewn into it.

He glanced around. No one was watching. With careful, deliberate movements, he worked at the binding's edge with his thumbnail. The thread was old, brittle. It gave way with a soft snap.

Inside the hollow spine: a small leather pouch, no larger than a deck of cards.

Jeremy's breath caught.

He opened the pouch with trembling fingers. Inside: a folded piece of parchment, yellowed with age, and a brass key no larger than his thumb.

Jeremy unfolded it.

It was a family tree, hand-drawn, in French. At the top: *Merovech II dit "Sangreal" et Gunthruda*. Below, generations of names, branches spreading like a river delta, until near the bottom: *Clodebald von Sanguis, épousé Hildegarde Tiedeblut, 1427*.

The connection. Documented. Dated.

"Photograph it," Brennan whispered. "Don't take the original. We can't risk alerting the Custodes that we've been here."

Jeremy used his phone to photograph every inch of the document, high resolution, multiple angles.

As he slid the parchment back between the pages, the skeptic in him surfaced again. *One document. That's all this is. Old paper with names written on it.* How many forged genealogies had made the rounds in conspiracy circles? How many people had convinced themselves they were secretly descended from royalty based on nothing more than faded ink and wishful thinking?

Crawford seemed to read his expression. "You're still fighting it."

Jeremy glanced at her. "Wouldn't you?"

Crawford held his gaze for a moment. Then: "Three days ago, I would have said yes. But I've seen too much since then. People don't burn down funeral homes and send hit squads over fairy tales, Mr. Schoemaker."

Fair point, Jeremy admitted. But still—one document didn't prove anything. Not yet.

They were leaving the library, walking toward the exit, when Jeremy noticed the man.

Standing near the coat check, pretending to read a brochure. Dark suit. Roman collar.

A priest.

Their eyes met for a fraction of a second.

And Jeremy saw it: recognition. Then anger.

"Run," Brennan hissed.

They ran.

Out through the front doors, down the steps, into the Chicago afternoon. Behind them, footsteps, shouts in Italian—

"Fermalo! Stop him!"

A car screeched to a stop at the curb. Crawford at the wheel. "GET IN!"

They dove into the car. Crawford accelerated before the doors were even closed.

In the rearview mirror, Jeremy saw three men in dark suits pile into a black sedan.

"We've got company," he said.

"I know." Crawford yanked the wheel, took a hard right onto Clark Street. "Hold on."

What followed was ten minutes of pure chaos—screeching tires, running red lights, Crawford's military driving training on full display. She finally lost the tail by ducking into the underground parking garage of the Willis Tower and sitting in the dark for twenty minutes, engine off, barely breathing.

When they were certain they'd lost the pursuit, Crawford drove them to a safe house in Evanston.

Inside, Jeremy collapsed onto a worn couch, the genealogical chart from the Newberry Library clutched in his trembling hands. His heart was still hammering. His shirt was soaked with sweat.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, a voice was whispering that none of this was real.

Maybe I'm having a breakdown.

He stared at the yellowed parchment. Names and dates stretching back centuries. *Merovech II. Gunthrada. Clodebald von Sanguis.* It looked like something from a museum. Or an expensive prop from a period film.

Dad dies. I snap. And suddenly I'm in a thriller novel.

It was possible, wasn't it? People had mental breaks all the time. Stress-induced psychosis. Grief manifesting as delusion. Maybe he was still sitting in his rental car in Rock Island, staring at an empty box while his mother called a doctor.

But then he looked at the DNA reports. At the laboratory accreditation numbers he'd verified himself. At the photographs of the Tiedemann journal with its coded genealogy. At the gunmen who had just chased them through the streets of Chicago.

Either this is the most elaborate hoax in human history, he thought, *or...*

He couldn't finish the sentence. Not yet.

Jeremy's phone buzzed before they even got inside.

An unknown number. No message. Just an image.

He opened it, and his heart stopped.

Juliet and Joslyn, walking down the sidewalk toward Lincoln East High School. Shot from across the street. Telephoto lens. Their faces perfectly clear, caught mid-laugh about something. Joslyn's backpack strap slipping off her shoulder. Juliet checking her phone.

They had no idea they were being photographed.

"Crawford." His voice came out strangled.

She looked at the screen. Her jaw tightened. Her eyes narrowed to slits.

"They're sending a message." Her voice dropped. "They can reach your girls anytime they want."

No threats. No demands. Just the image. A promise and a warning wrapped in silence.

Jeremy's hands shook as he pocketed the phone.

A second buzz. This one from the Lincoln contact Crawford had mentioned earlier. A status update:

All quiet. Girls arrived at school 0745. No unusual activity.

He exhaled. Then a third message came through, from the same number:

Update: Noticed vehicle we've seen before. Black sedan, tinted windows. Parked on 27th Street, line of sight to main entrance. Keeping distance. Watching.

Jeremy's stomach dropped. They'd found his daughters. Not just some random photo—active surveillance. The sedan was still there. Watching.

"Crawford." He showed her the messages. "We need to move them. Now."

Crawford shook her head slowly. "Not yet."

"What do you mean, *not yet*? They're watching my girls—"

"If we move them, we confirm they're valuable." Crawford's voice was calm but firm. "Right now, the Custodes are observing. Gathering intelligence. The moment we extract your daughters, we tell them exactly how much they matter. We paint a target on their backs."

"There's already a target on their backs!"

"A suspected target. Not a confirmed one." Crawford met his eyes. "Your daughters are safer hidden in plain sight, surrounded by our people, than they would be running. Trust me on this."

Jeremy wanted to argue. Wanted to scream. But he saw the calculation in Crawford's eyes—the same calculation he'd made a thousand times in business. Sometimes the smartest move was to wait.

It didn't make it any easier.

"Who are you calling?" Crawford asked sharply as he pulled out the device again.

"My daughters." He was already dialing. "They're in Lincoln, Nebraska, with their mother. If these people went after my mom, they might—"

"Use a burner. Not your personal phone." She handed him a prepaid device. "They can trace—"

But the line was already connecting.

"Dad?" Juliet's voice, his oldest at seventeen. Sharp as a tack, already taking AP courses in everything. "It's like two in the morning. What's—"

"Jules, listen to me. Is Joslyn with you?"

"She's asleep. Dad, you sound weird. What's going on?"

"Wake her up. Both of you need to pack bags and go to Uncle Marcus's house. Tonight. Don't tell anyone where you're going."

A pause. He heard muffled voices, then Joslyn came on the line, sleep-thick but alert. "Dad? What's happening?"

"I'll explain everything, but first—has anything strange happened lately? Anyone asking about the family?"

Silence. Then Joslyn's voice, quieter now: "Actually... there was this guy outside our school today. Taking pictures. Juliet spotted him—she thought he was probably just some creep, but..." She trailed off. "And there's this new priest at St. Mary's. Father something. He started last week, and he's been kind of... intense."

His breath caught. The photo Crawford had just shown him—Juliet and Joslyn walking to school. Shot from across the street.

Jeremy's grip tightened on the phone. "Intense how?"

“He pulled me aside after youth group. Asked about our family history. Whether Grandpa ever gave us anything special to keep safe. Old books, heirlooms, anything like that.” Joslyn paused. “I told him no. But Dad, the way he looked at me when I said it—like he knew I was lying. Even though I wasn’t.”

Crawford and Brennan exchanged a glance.

“He asked Juliet too,” Joslyn continued. “Same questions. Different day. Like he was checking our stories against each other.”

Jeremy’s stomach turned to ice. They were already circling. Already probing. His daughters weren’t just being watched—they were being *interviewed*.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he said. “Both of you. Don’t talk to that priest again. Don’t talk to *anyone* about Grandpa. Do you understand?”

“Dad, you’re scaring me.”

“Good. You should be scared. Now wake your sister up.”

When Juliet spoke again, her voice had changed—the casual teenage affect replaced by something harder, more focused. She’d always been like that in a crisis. Like her father.

“This is about Grandpa, isn’t it? About whatever he left you?”

Jeremy hesitated. “How did you—”

“Because Joslyn and I have been doing research since the funeral. We found some of Grandpa’s old files in the cloud backup you set up for him. Dad, there’s some seriously weird stuff in there. Genealogy charts that go back like a thousand years. Letters in German. And this symbol that keeps showing up—a cross inside a rose inside a chalice.”

The floor seemed to tilt. The amulet. They’d found references to the amulet.

“Jules, I need you to stop looking into that. Right now. It’s not safe.”

“Dad.” A new voice—Joslyn, fifteen, sleep-rough but alert. The puzzle-solver of the family. While Juliet attacked problems head-on, Joslyn circled them, finding angles no one else saw. “We already decoded part of the journal.”

“What journal?”

“The one in Grandpa’s files. There was a PDF scan of some old book with symbols and weird text. Joslyn figured out it’s a substitution cipher,” Juliet said. “She’s been working on it for three days.”

Jeremy looked at Brennan, who was listening intently.

“Put me on speaker,” he told his daughters. “And tell us what you found.”

Joslyn’s voice filled the room: “The cipher uses a Templar cross as the key. Each arm of the cross represents a different alphabet shift. Once you apply it, the Latin becomes readable. It’s a genealogy, Dad. Names and dates going back to someone called ‘Sarah of Magdala.’ And there’s a section about locations—four of them. Places where ‘proof of the blood’ was hidden.”

“Chicago, Hamburg, Jerusalem, Rome,” Jeremy said quietly.

Something shifted in his chest. Something he’d been fighting since the moment he read his father’s letter.

Two sources. Thousands of miles apart. The same names, the same dates, the same locations.

His daughters in Nebraska, working from scanned documents in the cloud. Him in Illinois, holding the actual amulet his father had worn for decades. No collusion. No coordination. And they’d arrived at identical conclusions.

His tech brain—the brain that had built three companies on separating signal from noise—finally clicked.

The data matches.

Not one source. Not one document. Not one witness. But independent verification from multiple directions, all pointing to the same truth. That was how you validated an algorithm. That was

how you knew something was real.

“How did you know that?” Joslyn asked.

“Because I’m holding the key your grandfather left me. And I just retrieved the first piece of proof from Chicago.”

Silence on the line.

Then Joslyn: “Dad... is this real? Are we really... I mean, the genealogy traces back to—”

“Yes.” The word came out before he could stop it. Before he could qualify it or hedge it or add his usual skeptical caveats. “I think it is. I think it’s real.”

He gripped the phone tighter. “Which is why you need to get somewhere safe. Now. Tonight.”

“We can help,” Juliet said. “We’re already ahead of you on the cipher work. And Joslyn found something about the Hamburg location—a church crypt, she thinks. Something hidden behind a Tiedemann family vault.”

Jeremy looked at Crawford, then Brennan.

“Let them help,” Brennan said quietly. “If they’ve already cracked the cipher, they’re too valuable to sideline. And if the Custodes know about you, they may already know about your daughters. Better to keep them close—even if ‘close’ is digital.”

Jeremy’s chest tightened. His little girls, dragged into a two-thousand-year-old conspiracy.

But they weren’t little anymore. And they were *good* at this.

Too good, maybe. A memory surfaced: Joslyn at age six, solving a 500-piece puzzle in under an hour. Juliet at eight, teaching herself to read by analyzing patterns in her picture books before anyone had formally taught her phonics. Jeremy had always chalked it up to good genes, to the stimulating environment he and Elizabeth had built around them in those early years.

But his father had noticed too. Had visited more often after the girls were born. Had played “special games” with them—pattern recognition exercises disguised as fun. Had given them puzzles for

Christmas that were supposedly years beyond their age level. They'd solved them all.

"Those girls are special," his father had said once, watching Joslyn decode a cryptogram meant for adults. *"They see connections others miss. It's in the blood."*

Jeremy had thought it was just grandpa talk. Pride in his grandchildren. Now he wondered if his father had been preparing them too. Cultivating abilities they didn't know they had. Planting seeds that would bloom exactly when they were needed.

It's in the blood.

How much had his father known? How much had he planned?

"Okay," he said into the phone. "Go to Marcus's house. Set up secure video. And start sending me everything you've decoded."

"On it," Juliet said. "Dad? Be careful."

"You too, baby. Both of you."

He ended the call and stared at the phone.

Joslyn's voice still echoed in his head. That brilliant, curious voice.

Fifteen years ago. Meningitis. Five doctors absolutely certain, including her own mother Elizabeth—a prestigious anesthesiologist who'd seen the bacteria in the cultures herself. The prognosis: death, or severe disability.

Then the next morning, the Chief of Staff had apologized. The cultures were clear. The bacteria was simply... gone. Two days later, the baby went home, perfectly healthy.

Elizabeth had been haunted. *Jeremy, I saw bacteria. Four other doctors said the same thing. They were absolutely certain.*

And now that same brilliant daughter was cracking ancient ciphers.

"Remarkable children," Brennan said quietly. "There is an old saying among the Brethren: *The Royal Art protects its own.* Impossible survivals. Miraculous births. These are the marks of the bloodline, Mr. Schoemaker. Fate itself intervenes."

Jeremy stared at him. “You’re saying the bloodline... protects itself?”

“I’m saying something does. Call it Providence. Call it divine intervention. Call it genetic luck if that makes you more comfortable.” Brennan’s eyes were steady. “But I’ve seen too many carriers walk away from things that should have killed them. Too many children survive diagnoses that should have been death sentences. The bloodline endures, Mr. Schoemaker. It always has.”

“They take after their grandfather.” Jeremy pocketed the burner, then picked it up again. “One more call.”

Brandi answered on the first ring. “Jeremy. Thank God. I’ve been watching the news—there was something about a fire at that mortuary, and then I couldn’t reach you—”

“I’m safe. For now.” He moved to the window, stared out at the dark Evanston streets. “Brandi, what I’m about to tell you is going to sound insane.”

“Honey, I’ve been married to you for three years. I’ve heard about the bicycle accident that should have severed your femoral artery. The car crash where you walked away without a scratch while everyone else nearly died. That night at 2 AM when something woke you up and told you to email the woman who would save your life. Your father’s heart beating for twenty-four years when doctors said three.” Her voice was steady, warm. “You’ve lived a thousand lives, Jeremy. Nothing you tell me is going to sound insane.”

So he told her. All of it. The bloodline. The Vatican. The proof his father had gathered over a lifetime.

When he finished, there was a long silence.

“Brandi?”

“I’m here.” Her voice was thoughtful, not shocked. “Jeremy... I’ve always known there was something different about you. About your family. The things that have happened to you—they’re not

normal. They're not luck. I've prayed about it, wondered what God's plan was for you."

"And now you know I might be descended from Jesus Christ, and you're... okay with that?"

"I'm a Christian, Jeremy. I believe Jesus was fully God *and* fully human. If he was human, he could have had children. The Bible doesn't say he didn't—it just doesn't mention it. That's not heresy. That's just... history we weren't told."

"The Vatican seems to think it's heresy."

"The Vatican thinks a lot of things." There was steel in her voice now. "What matters is what's true. And if your family has spent generations protecting this truth, then maybe it's time the world knew."

"You think I should go public?"

"I think you should do what your father asked. Gather the proof. Tell the story. Let people decide for themselves what it means." A pause. "And Jeremy? My mother called today. She's been praying for you too. She said something strange—said she had a dream about you, about a journey. She wants to help."

"Help how?"

"I don't know yet. But you know Mama. When she gets a feeling about something, she's usually right."

Jeremy smiled despite everything. Brandi's mother, Maggie, was one of the kindest people he'd ever met—and one of the most devout. If she said she wanted to help, she meant it.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too. Now go save the world, or whatever it is you're doing."

He ended the call.

"Now let's talk about Hamburg."

"One down," Jeremy said, catching his breath. "Three to go."

Brennan shook his head. “They know you’re collecting the proof now. Rome and Jerusalem are going to be infinitely more dangerous. Those are their strongholds.”

“Then we save them for last,” Jeremy said. “Hamburg next.”

Crawford’s phone buzzed. She read the message, and her expression darkened.

“Change of plans,” she said quietly. “That priest at the library? He wasn’t Custodes Fidei.”

“Then who—”

“Vatican Security Services. Official. Which means this isn’t just a rogue order hunting you anymore.” She met Jeremy’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “The Church itself just got involved. The *entire* Church.”

Brennan went pale. “That changes everything.”

“Hamburg next,” Jeremy repeated, his jaw tight. “But we leave tonight.”

Jeremy’s burner phone buzzed. He looked at the screen.

Another photo. Juliet and Joslyn at a coffee shop window. Shot through the glass. They were laughing, unaware. The timestamp read: 47 minutes ago.

No message. No sender ID. Just the image.

Jeremy stared at the screen. His hands shook.

“They’re escalating,” Crawford said, looking over his shoulder. “Letting you know they can reach your family anytime. Anywhere.”

Another message arrived. Three words:

Choose wisely, Father.

The phone slipped from Jeremy’s fingers. Father. They knew he had daughters. They were watching them right now, through coffee shop windows, close enough to touch.

Close enough to kill.

* * *

CHAPTER 9: THE

SAFE HOUSE

Evanston, Illinois

November 11, 2020

2:47 AM



The knock came at 2:47 AM.

Crawford had her weapon drawn before the second knock landed. She motioned Jeremy back, positioned herself beside the door, and called out: “Who’s there?”

“Denise, it’s Brandi. Brandi Schoemaker. I’m alone.”

Jeremy’s heart lurched. He pushed past Crawford before she could stop him and yanked open the door.

Brandi stood in the hallway, overnight bag clutched in white-knuckled hands, hair escaping from a hasty ponytail. She’d clearly come straight from the airport—he recognized her travel clothes, the comfortable yoga pants and oversized sweater she always wore on flights.

“I took the red-eye from Dallas,” she said, her voice steady but her eyes wild with something Jeremy couldn’t quite name. “I couldn’t just sit there and wait. Not after everything you told me.”

“How did you find—”

“Your mother-in-law,” Crawford said, holstering her weapon with a grimace. “Maggie called me. Said Brandi was on her way and that I should expect her. Apparently she has... strong feelings about her daughter walking into a war zone unprepared.”

“Mama’s been doing her own research,” Brandi said. She stepped inside, and Jeremy pulled her into his arms. She was shaking—he could feel the tremors running through her shoulders—but she didn’t cry. “She found things, Jeremy. Old family journals on her side. Her grandmother’s grandmother was French. From Provence.”

Jeremy pulled back. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe God put us together for a reason.” Brandi’s laugh was brittle. “My husband turns out to be descended from Jesus Christ, and I’m just supposed to be... what? The supportive wife in the background? That’s not me, Jeremy. That’s never been me.”

Brennan stepped forward. “Mrs. Schoemaker, with all due respect, this situation is extremely dangerous. Your husband is being hunted by—”

“I know exactly who’s hunting him.” Brandi’s voice cut like a scalpel. “You think I haven’t been reading? You think I haven’t been praying on this for three days straight? I’m a nurse, Mr. Brennan. I’ve held people’s hands while they died. I’ve watched miracles happen in the ICU that no medical textbook can explain. And I’ve watched people with no fight left in them just... give up.”

She turned back to Jeremy, and now he saw what was in her eyes. Not fear. *Resolve*.

“Show me,” she said. “Show me the proof.”

Jeremy hesitated. Then he pulled out his phone, opened the photographs from the Newberry Library—the genealogy chart, the names stretching back through centuries.

Brandi studied the screen in silence. Her finger traced the line of descent, pausing at certain names, moving on. When she reached the top—*Sarah of Magdala, daughter of Yeshua and Miriam*—she stopped breathing.

“Oh,” she whispered. Just that. *Oh*.

She handed the phone back. Walked to the window. Stood there for a long moment, silhouetted against the Evanston streetlights.

“When I was seven,” she said quietly, “my grandmother told me something. She said that Jesus wasn’t just God walking around in a human costume. She said he was *really* human. He got tired. He got hungry. He wept at Lazarus’s tomb even though he knew he was about to raise him from the dead. He felt everything we feel.”

She turned back to face them. Her cheeks were wet, but her voice was steady.

“If he felt everything we feel... then he loved. Really loved. Not just agape love for all humanity. But the love of a man for a woman.” She crossed back to Jeremy, took his hands in hers. “My

whole life, I've believed in a Christ who understands human suffering because he experienced it. Why would I believe any differently about human love?"

"The Church—" Brennan started.

"The Church has been wrong before." Brandi's grip on Jeremy's hands tightened. "They were wrong about Galileo. They were wrong about a lot of things. Being wrong doesn't mean they're evil. It just means they're human too." She looked at Brennan. "The men hunting my husband—they're the ones who forgot that Jesus was human. They made him into a symbol instead of a person. And they'll kill to protect that symbol."

Crawford studied Brandi with new respect. "That's... a remarkably clear-eyed assessment."

"I've had three days of no sleep to think about it." Brandi managed a small smile. "And about a hundred hours of prayer. This isn't shaking my faith, Mr. Brennan. It's *deepening* it. Because if the bloodline is real—if my husband carries even a trace of that sacred DNA—then God has been protecting this truth for two thousand years. And He brought Jeremy and me together for a reason."

She looked at her husband. "So you're not doing this alone. Not anymore."

Jeremy pulled her close. For a moment, they just stood there—husband and wife, bound by something far older than their marriage.

"Hamburg," Brandi said into his shoulder. "That's next?"

"Yeah."

"Then we go to Hamburg." She pulled back, wiped her eyes, and suddenly she was the Brandi he knew—practical, organized, unstoppable. "But first, I need coffee. And someone needs to explain to me exactly what we're up against."

Crawford actually smiled. "I think I'm going to like having you on the team, Mrs. Schoemaker."

“Call me Brandi. And I’m not ‘on the team.’ I’m protecting my family.” She looked at Jeremy. “Both of them. All sixty-two generations.”

* * *

They moved toward the door. Crawford went first, checking the hallway—

A sound like the world cracking open.

The window behind Jeremy detonated inward—not shattered, *detonated*—a wall of glass transformed into a thousand spinning razors. The concussive wave hit him like a truck at full speed, lifting him off his feet and hurling him backward. His skull cracked against the far wall. Stars exploded across his vision.

He hit the floor. Couldn’t breathe. His lungs had forgotten how.

Glass everywhere. In his hair. Embedded in his forearms. A shard the size of a playing card jutted from his left bicep, blood already soaking through his shirt sleeve, hot and slick. The metallic taste of copper filled his mouth—he’d bitten through his tongue.

His ears screamed with a high-pitched whine that drowned everything to underwater silence. Through the smoke and plaster dust, the room tilted like a sinking ship. He blinked. Blinked again. Shapes refusing to resolve.

Move. You have to move.

He tried to push himself up. His palm slid through something wet. Blood. His blood. Pooling on the hardwood.

Crawford was down. Crumpled near the hallway door, one leg bent at an angle that made Jeremy’s stomach lurch. Not moving. God, please be breathing.

Brennan. Where was Brennan?

There—crawling toward Crawford, dragging himself hand over hand across the debris field. A gash had split his forehead to the bone, and blood sheeted down his face like rain on a windshield, dripping from his chin, leaving a crimson trail.

The front door didn't open. It exploded off its hinges.

Three men in tactical gear poured through the gap, moving with the fluid precision of predators. Black rifles up. Red laser dots sliced through the smoke like bloody fingers, hunting, searching.

One found Jeremy's chest.

His hand shot out, fingers closing around the backpack strap—the proof, the documents, the photographs, everything his father had died for, everything men were dying for right now—

The lead operative's rifle swung toward his head. Black eye of the barrel. So close he could smell the gun oil.

“DOWN! GET DOWN NOW!”

Jeremy's body moved before his mind caught up, diving behind the overturned couch as the first shots tore through the air where his skull had been a half-second before. The rounds punched through the couch fabric above him, showering him with foam and splinters. Something hot grazed his ear.

More shots. Muzzle flash strobing the smoke. Crawford screaming—*she was alive*—

A second window shattered.

Jeremy's vision tunneled. The backpack clutched to his chest. Glass grinding into his knees as he crawled. Brennan shouting something he couldn't hear through the ringing. The copper taste of blood. The chemical burn of cordite in his nostrils.

And then a shadow fell across him.

He looked up.

The operative stood over him, rifle aimed at his face, finger tightening on the—

The lights died.

Not a flicker. Not a brownout. Total darkness, sudden and absolute, as if God himself had yanked the plug.

A single gunshot split the black—not the operative’s rifle, something smaller, sharper—and the shadow above Jeremy crumpled sideways with a wet gurgle.

“Move!”

Crawford’s voice. Somewhere to his left. How was she even standing?

Jeremy rolled, scrambled, his knees grinding through glass and debris. Muzzle flashes strobed the darkness—two, three, four bursts from different angles. Men screaming. The heavy thud of bodies hitting hardwood.

A hand grabbed his collar. Yanked him upright.

“Back door. Now.” Crawford. Her voice was wire-tight with pain, but her grip was iron. She half-dragged him through the kitchen, her other hand clutching a pistol that still trailed smoke.

Behind them, more shots. Return fire from the remaining operatives, punching holes through drywall, hunting blind.

“Brennan—” Jeremy gasped.

“Already out. Move.”

Cold air hit his face. They were in an alley. A black SUV waited, engine running, headlights dark. The side door flew open.

“Get in!” Brennan’s voice, ragged but commanding.

Jeremy dove into the back seat. Crawford piled in after him, slamming the door as tires screamed against asphalt. The SUV rocketed forward, throwing him against the seat.

He looked back through the rear window. The safehouse was a shadow against shadows. No pursuit lights. Not yet.

“The power—” Jeremy started.

“Brothers in the electric company,” Brennan said from the front seat. Blood still masked half his face, but his voice was steady. “We have contingencies. Many contingencies.”

Crawford slumped against the door beside Jeremy, one hand pressed to her side. Dark wetness seeped between her fingers.

"You're hit."

"Ribs. Through and through. I'll live." She closed her eyes. "Worry about yourself, Schoemaker. You're bleeding from about six different places."

He looked down. She was right. His hands, his knees, a gash across his forearm he didn't remember getting. The adrenaline was fading now, and everything was starting to hurt at once.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Nowhere," Brennan said. "For the next five days, we don't exist. Safe house in Wisconsin. No phones, no internet, no contact with the outside world. The Custodes will be watching every airport, every train station, every bus terminal."

"And then?"

"And then, Brother Schoemaker, we fly you to Hamburg. Through Canada. Under a name even your mother wouldn't recognize."

Jeremy clutched the backpack to his chest—the proof, the photographs, his father's legacy—and watched the lights of the city blur past.

Five days of silence. Then Germany.

Crawford's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen, and Jeremy watched the color drain from her face.

"What?"

She turned the phone toward him. A photograph. His daughters' high school in Lincoln. The timestamp was three hours ago. And standing at the edge of the frame, barely visible in the shadows near the gymnasium entrance, a man in a dark coat. Watching. Waiting.

Below the image, a single line of text:

The bloodline has two branches, Mr. Schoemaker. We can prune them both.

The van sped through the darkness, but Jeremy suddenly felt like he wasn't moving at all. Like he was frozen in place while the world collapsed around him.

His daughters. They'd found his daughters.

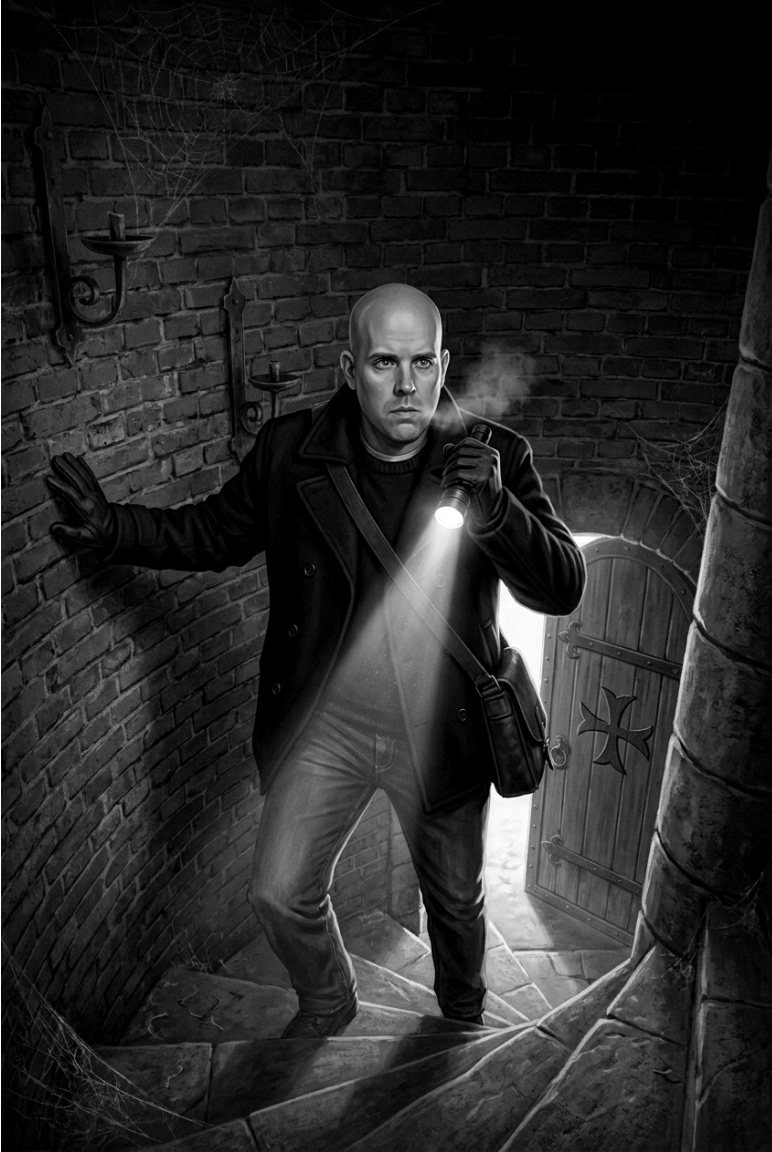
* * *

CHAPTER 10: THE

CRYPT

Hamburg, Germany

November 18, 2020



Five days of silence. Five days of false trails and safe houses and encrypted communications. Five days during which Brennan coordinated with the German Grand Lodge while Crawford

arranged their travel through a maze of private flights and forged documentation.

The team had been whittled down by Chicago. Two Brothers injured, one in custody after drawing the police away from their escape route. But Crawford and Brennan remained at Jeremy's side, their mission unchanged: gather the proof before the Custodes caught up.

Jeremy's burner phone vibrated in his pocket as he stepped off the plane in Hamburg.

Another photo. Both girls getting into their mother's car outside Marcus's house. Timestamp: 47 minutes ago.

They'd moved to a safe location. And still, somehow, the Custodes knew exactly where they were.

"We need to move faster," Jeremy muttered.

Germany was cold in November, the wind off the North Sea cutting through Jeremy's jacket as he stood in the shadow of St. Michaelis Church, one of Hamburg's most famous baroque Lutheran churches. The air tasted of salt and coming rain, carrying the briny tang of the Elbe River and the distant rumble of ships in the harbor. Seagulls wheeled overhead, their cries echoing off the church's copper-green spire.

According to the amulet's encoded instructions, Jacob Tiedemann had hidden the original family journal—the one Jeremy's father had left a copy of—in a crypt beneath this church before emigrating to America in 1838.

"Lutheran church, secret Catholic bloodline," Jeremy muttered. "The irony is not lost on me."

Getting into the crypt required help from the German Grand Lodge, Brothers who arranged a private after-hours tour with the church's pastor—himself a Mason, as it turned out.

"Your family's story is known to us," Pastor Mueller said in accented English as he led Jeremy down stone steps into the crypt. The air grew colder with each step, thick with the smell of damp

stone and centuries of candle smoke. The walls wept with condensation, slick under Jeremy's fingertips as he steadied himself on the narrow stairs. "The Tiedemann line, yes? They were respected merchants, very devout. No one suspected their secret."

The crypt was lined with burial vaults dating back to the 1600s, the vaulted ceiling pressing low overhead, inscribed names worn smooth by generations of grieving hands. Mueller stopped at one marked *TIEDEMANN 1760-1842*.

"Wilhelm Tiedemann," Jeremy said, recognizing the name from the genealogy. "Jacob's father."

"Indeed. And if the legends are true..." Mueller produced a key, unlocked a small access panel at the base of the vault. "...behind here."

Jeremy knelt, reached into the dark space, felt around—
—and his fingers closed on oiled leather.

He pulled out a package, wrapped in waterproof cloth. Inside: the journal. The original. Pages fragile as butterfly wings, covered in the same code and symbols as the copy his father had left.

But this one had something the copy didn't: a letter, dated 1838, from Jacob to his unnamed descendants:

To Those Who Follow,

I carry this burden to the New World, where I pray my children and their children will be free from persecution. I leave this journal here, in the city of my birth, so that if ever the truth is challenged, proof will remain in the land of our fathers.

Guard the bloodline. Honor the legacy. Remember that we are not divine—we are human. And that is enough.

Jacob Tiedemann, July 1838

Jeremy carefully photographed every page, then returned the journal to its hiding place.

“Two down,” he said. “Two to go.”

Pastor Mueller placed a hand on his shoulder. “Be careful, my friend. Rome and Jerusalem are not like Chicago and Hamburg. In those cities, the Custodes Fidei are everywhere. They own the police, the politicians, the very stones of the streets. You will be walking into the lion’s den.”

“I know,” Jeremy said. “But I’m not alone.”

His phone buzzed. A message from his Lincoln contact—the same Brother who’d been watching the black sedan.

An image loaded. Joslyn, walking through the front doors of Lincoln East High School. Morning sunlight catching her hair. Backpack over one shoulder. Smiling at something a friend had said.

Everything looked normal. Safe. His little girl, living her life.

Jeremy felt something loosen in his chest. They were okay. The Masons were watching. The Custodes were keeping their distance.

Then his father’s phone buzzed.

Jeremy looked at the screen. His blood turned to ice.

72 HOURS.

Surrender. Or your daughters die.

Juliet. Joslyn.

Such pretty names.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

— Custodes Fidei

He showed the message to Mueller. The pastor went white.

Seventy-two hours.

Three days.

4,320 minutes.

And two impossible targets left: Jerusalem and Rome.

Jeremy's jaw clenched. "We move. Now."

The threat hung over him like a blade. Real or bluff, he couldn't know—but he couldn't risk his daughters' lives on a gamble.

Halfway up the stone steps. Jeremy heard it.

A soft *click*.

Wrong sound. Wrong place.

Mueller froze. Flashlight swept upward.

Red dot. Jeremy's chest.

"DOWN!"

Shot shattered silence. Bullet sparked stone. Inches from his skull.

Jeremy threw himself sideways. Tumbled. Backpack flying. Photographs scattering.

Second shot. Mueller's flashlight exploded.

Darkness. Total.

Scrambling. Hands and knees. Blind. Cold stone.

Footsteps above. Multiple. Fast.

Click-click. Weapons ready.

Iron gate. Tiedemann vault. Jeremy pressed against Wilhelm's tomb.

Beam swept past. Inches from his feet.

A voice. Calm. Accented. Close.

Too close.

"Mr. Schoemaker. Heat signature. We see you."

Pause.

"Five seconds. Then we shoot through the vault."

Five.

Jeremy's hand found something on the floor.

Four.

The original journal. Two thousand years of secrets.

Three.

Red dots danced across iron bars. Three of them.

Two.

He thought of his daughters. Juliet. Joslyn. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*
One.

The first bullet punched through iron—
—and sparked off stone two inches from Jeremy’s skull.

He felt the heat. Smelled the cordite. Tasted copper where he’d
bitten through his lip.

Move.

His body obeyed before his mind caught up. Rolling left.
Shoulder screaming. Backpack dragging. Another shot. Another.
Sparks dancing in the darkness like hellfire fireflies.

“STAY DOWN!” Mueller’s voice. Somewhere above.

A crash. Glass shattering. Then light—blinding, searing—as the
pastor hurled something at the shooters. A Molotov? No. A
lantern. The oil caught. Flames erupted across the stone stairs,
blocking the passage, the heat driving the shooters back.

Through the fire, he saw Mueller’s silhouette. Standing tall.
Arms spread wide.

“GO!” the pastor roared. “The tunnel! Behind the altar!”

Jeremy scrambled backward. His hand found cold iron. A
grate. Rusted hinges that hadn’t moved in decades.

He pulled. Nothing.

Another shot. Mueller grunted. Staggered.

“MUELLER!”

“I said GO!” Blood on his voice now. Wet. Wrong.

Jeremy pulled harder. Something in his shoulder tore—a
white-hot lance of pain—but the grate shifted. Groaned. Gave way.

A hole. Darkness below. The smell of centuries-old dust and
something else. River water. Sewage. Rot.

He didn’t hesitate.

He dropped.

* * *

The fall was only eight feet, but it felt like a hundred.

Jeremy hit stone. Hard. His ankle twisted. His teeth clicked together. The backpack—the photographs, the journal, everything—slammed into his spine and drove the air from his lungs.

For three seconds, he couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Just lay there in absolute darkness, listening to his heartbeat thunder in his ears.

Above: gunfire. Shouting. Mueller's voice, fainter now, still defiant.

Then silence.

He's buying you time. Don't waste it.

Jeremy forced himself up. His ankle throbbed. His shoulder screamed. He reached into his pocket, fumbled for his phone—

The screen lit up. Three percent battery. The pale glow illuminated a narrow tunnel, barely four feet high, walls slick with moisture. Medieval brickwork. Templar symbols carved at regular intervals.

The escape route. Just like Mueller had said.

Jeremy moved.

He crawled on hands and knees through centuries of accumulated filth. The cold bit through his clothes, seeped into his bones. Water—or something worse—soaked his pants, his shoes, turned his fingers numb. The smell hit hard: decay, filth, and centuries of accumulation.

Behind him, scraping. Voices. They were following.

Faster.

The tunnel branched. Left or right.

A Templar cross carved above the left passage. Faded. Almost invisible.

Jeremy went left.

The passage narrowed. His shoulders scraped the walls. Brick dust rained into his eyes, his mouth. He spat, blinked, kept moving. The phone screen died. Total darkness now.

He crawled by touch alone. One hand in front of the other. Knees grinding against stone. The tunnel sloped downward. The water got deeper. To his waist now. Cold as death.

Keep moving. Keep—

His hand found empty space.

He pitched forward, fell through blackness, splashed into water that closed over his head like a fist.

* * *

Jeremy surfaced gasping.

The current was strong. Faster than he'd expected. He thrashed, trying to find footing, but there was no bottom—just rushing water that pulled him deeper, faster, into blackness.

His backpack. Still strapped to his chest. The photographs. The proof.

He clutched it tighter as the underground river carried him deeper into Hamburg's forgotten places.

The water was ice. His muscles cramped. His lungs burned. Every breath tasted like iron and sewage.

This is how I die. In a German sewer.

Then—light. Faint. Gray.

An opening ahead. The tunnel widened. The current slowed.

Jeremy's feet found bottom—slick concrete, recent construction. The ancient Templar escape route had merged with Hamburg's modern storm drain system.

He pulled himself onto a concrete ledge, coughing water that tasted like rust and despair. His hands shook so badly he couldn't grip. His body had stopped shivering—hypothermia setting in.

Move. You stop moving, you die.

He stumbled forward. The drainage tunnel was large enough to walk in now. Emergency lights flickered at distant intervals, just enough to see shapes. He followed them like breadcrumbs.

Ten minutes. Twenty.

His phone was dead. His watch had stopped. Time had become meaningless—just one foot in front of the other, through the bowels of a city that had hidden secrets since before America existed.

Then: a ladder. Steel rungs bolted into the wall. Leading up.

Jeremy climbed.

His hands were so cold he couldn't feel the metal. Twice he nearly fell. But he kept climbing, kept pulling himself toward the rectangle of gray light above.

He emerged into rain.

Hamburg stretched before him—bridges and canals, church spires and neon lights. He'd come up near the Speicherstadt, the old warehouse district. Tourist boats drifted on the gray water. People walked past, umbrellas raised against the drizzle.

No one looked at him. Just another wet, shivering man emerging from a maintenance hatch.

Jeremy found a payphone. His fingers barely worked, but he managed to dial the emergency number Crawford had made him memorize.

Three rings.

"Identify."

"Schoemaker. Hamburg. Mueller is—" His voice cracked. "Mueller is dead. Or captured. I don't know."

Silence. Then: "Location?"

He read the street sign. His German was terrible, but he managed.

"Twenty minutes. Stay where you are. Look for a gray van."

The line went dead.

Jeremy slumped against the phone booth, his body finally giving in to the cold and the shock and the weight of what had just happened.

Pastor Mueller. A man he'd known for less than three hours. A man who'd stood in fire so Jeremy could run.

The bloodline must be preserved.

How many people had died for those words? How many more would?

* * *

The gray van arrived in eighteen minutes.

Crawford was inside. So was a German Brother named Klaus, built like a boxer, who wrapped Jeremy in thermal blankets and pressed a thermos of hot coffee into his shaking hands.

“You look like hell,” Crawford said.

“Feel worse.” His teeth chattered. “Mueller?”

Crawford’s jaw tightened. “German police found his body in the crypt twenty minutes ago. Three gunshot wounds. He died holding them off.”

Jeremy closed his eyes. The coffee burned his throat, but he couldn’t feel the heat.

“Did he have family?”

“A daughter. She’s being notified.” Crawford’s voice softened—barely. “He knew the risks, Jeremy. We all do.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“No. It doesn’t.” She handed him dry clothes. “Change. We have a plane waiting at Hamburg Airport. Private charter to Tel Aviv. You’ll be in Jerusalem in four hours.”

“Four hours.” Jeremy looked at his dead phone, now plugged into a charger in the van. “The seventy-two hours they gave me—you think it’s real?”

“Psychological warfare. Classic pressure tactic.” She met his eyes in the rearview mirror. “Your daughters are still safe. Brennan has people watching them around the clock. The Custodes won’t actually move on the girls—not yet. They’re hoping the threat alone will make you crack. But the Custodes are getting more desperate.

This attack—sending shooters into a church, in front of witnesses—that’s not their style. They’re scared, Jeremy. You’re getting too close.”

“Close to what? I still have Jerusalem and Rome to hit. That’s —”

“Close to proof they can’t suppress. The journal, the ossuary inscription we’re going to find in Jerusalem, the Vatican documents—if you get all four pieces, if you can authenticate them publicly, it’s over. Two thousand years of lies, exposed. They’ll do anything to stop that.”

Jeremy stared at the Hamburg streets sliding past. The churches. The cafes. The ordinary people living ordinary lives, unaware that a war was being fought in their shadows.

He thought of Mueller standing in fire.

Guard the bloodline. Honor the legacy.

“Let them try,” Jeremy said quietly. “I’m not stopping.”

* * *

The plane was a Gulfstream G280, sleek and anonymous, waiting in a private hangar at the far end of Hamburg Airport. Klaus stayed behind to handle the police. Crawford came aboard with Jeremy, along with a medic who cleaned the cuts on his face and bandaged his shoulder.

“Torn rotator cuff,” the medic said. “You need surgery.”

“After.”

“It could get infected. You could lose mobility in—”

“After.”

The medic shrugged and packed his kit.

Jeremy sat in the leather seat, a fresh burner phone in his hand, staring at the message he’d received while underground. The same message that had started all this.

| 72 HOURS.

*Surrender. Or your daughters die.
Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Crawford said it was a bluff. Psychological warfare. Maybe she was right.

But every time Jeremy closed his eyes, he saw Juliet's face. Joslyn's smile. And the words burned into his brain like a brand: *Your daughters die.*

Bluff or not, he couldn't take the chance. He had to move faster. Find the proof. End this before the Custodes decided threats weren't enough.

The engines spooled up. The plane began to taxi.

Jeremy closed his eyes and let the vibration of the aircraft wash over him. He was exhausted. Hurt. Cold despite the blankets. And somewhere in the back of his mind, Mueller's face kept appearing—standing in fire, arms spread, roaring at him to run.

How many more people have to die for this?

But he knew the answer. The same answer every keeper of the bloodline had given for two thousand years.

As many as it takes.

The plane lifted off. Hamburg fell away below—the spires of St. Michaelis disappearing into the clouds, the crypt where Mueller had died already becoming another footnote in a secret history.

Jeremy opened the leather journal they'd photographed before everything went wrong. Jacob Tiedemann's letter, dated 1838:

Guard the bloodline. Honor the legacy. Remember that we are not divine—we are human. And that is enough.

Human. That was the point, wasn't it? Not that Jesus was God made flesh—the Church had built an empire on that claim. But that he was *human*. That he'd loved. That he'd created a family. That his blood still flowed in ordinary people living ordinary lives.

Mueller had been human. Brennan was human. Crawford, sitting across from him now, checking her weapon—human.

And somewhere in Lincoln, Nebraska, two teenage girls were human too. Juliet and Joslyn. The sixty-second generation of a bloodline stretching back to Jerusalem.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Jeremy looked out the window. Clouds below. Stars above. The Mediterranean somewhere ahead, and after that, Israel.

Jerusalem.

Where this had all begun.

He allowed himself one moment of stillness. One breath. One heartbeat of quiet before the storm resumed.

Then his phone buzzed.

Another photo. His daughters. Different location now—not Marcus's house. A coffee shop somewhere, the girls laughing at something on Juliet's phone, completely unaware they were being watched.

Timestamp: fourteen minutes ago.

The message beneath it was just three words: *We see everything.*

* * *

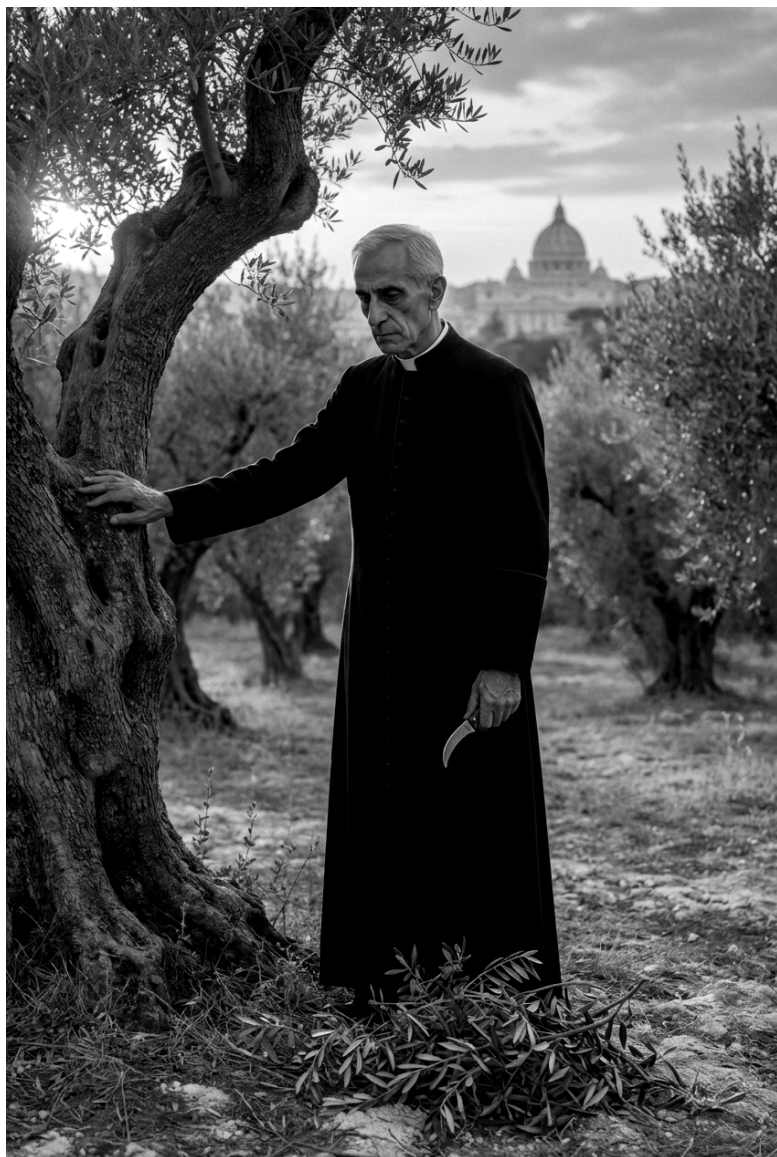
CHAPTER 11: THE SHEPHERD'S

CALCULUS

Vatican City

December 3, 2020

2:47 AM



The failure reports spread across Cardinal Rossini's desk like an accusation.

Chicago: Three operatives dead. The safe house compromised. Schoemaker escaped with DNA evidence and archival documents. The Masonic network had anticipated their ambush with precision that bordered on prescient.

Hamburg: Four more dead, including their best sniper. Pastor Mueller had sacrificed himself to allow Schoemaker access to the Tiedemann crypt. The original journal, with its damning authentication, was now in enemy hands.

Two cities. Seven operatives. Decades of careful planning unraveled in less than two weeks.

The seventy-two-hour ultimatum in Hamburg had been a calculated gamble—psychological pressure designed to make Schoemaker panic, make mistakes, expose himself. Instead, he had gone deeper underground, moved faster, gathered more allies. The bluff had failed spectacularly.

Rossini removed his reading glasses and pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. The headache that had started three days ago showed no signs of relenting. Sleep had become a stranger, replaced by endless hours of strategy sessions, damage assessments, contingency plans.

How is this man still alive?

It was the question that haunted him. In three decades of service, Rossini had never encountered a carrier like Jeremy Schoemaker. The others had been easy, relatively speaking. Academics who stayed in predictable routines. Farmers who never left their land. Teachers, shopkeepers, housewives. People whose daily lives followed patterns that could be studied, predicted, exploited.

Schoemaker was different. He adapted. He fought back. He surrounded himself with allies who were willing to die for him.

And somehow, impossibly, he kept surviving.

* * *

Rossini rose from his desk and reached for the worn leather case beside the window. Inside: pruning shears, polished and oiled, their handles smooth from generations of use. A ritual as old as his order.

He crossed to the heavy steel door concealed behind a tapestry depicting the Garden of Gethsemane. The door hissed open, revealing a spiral staircase that descended into absolute darkness. Rossini did not need light. He had made this journey a thousand times.

The hidden courtyard waited at the bottom—a pocket of air and earth sealed from the outside world for three centuries. No sunlight reached this place. The walls rose forty feet on all sides, the ancient stone blocking any glimpse of sky. Grow-lights, installed in the 1970s, cast their pale artificial glow on the courtyard's single occupant:

The Olive Tree of Pius V.

It had been planted in 1570, the year the Custodes Fidei was officially chartered. Every Prefect since had tended it in secret. The tree should have died centuries ago—olives need sun, need open air, need the Mediterranean warmth of their native soil. But this tree flourished in its sunless prison. Its trunk had grown thick as a man's torso. Its branches reached toward the artificial light with gnarled fingers, heavy with fruit each autumn.

A miracle, the priests who first discovered it had whispered.

Rossini knew better. The tree survived because it was tended. Pruned. Culled of weakness so that strength might remain.

He approached the trunk now, shears in hand, and began his inspection. His eyes—trained by decades of practice—found the diseased branches instantly. A cluster near the base, leaves yellowing with fungal rot. Another higher up, where insects had bored into the bark.

Snip.

The first diseased branch fell to the courtyard stones.

Snip.

The second.

“The shepherd tends his flock,” Rossini murmured, the words a liturgy now. “Some sheep wander. Some sheep sicken. And some sheep...” He found a healthy branch—young, vigorous, reaching toward the light—and positioned his shears around it. “...some sheep must be sacrificed so the flock survives.”

Snip.

The branch fell. Green leaves scattered across the ancient stones.

He had learned this lesson in Naples, watching his father bleed out on the cobblestones while Communist partisans laughed. Societies without God devolved into chaos. Faith was the shepherd that kept humanity from the cliff’s edge. And sometimes—sometimes—the shepherd had to cull individual sheep to protect the billions who needed to believe.

Maria Theresa Desmond, 1987. Buenos Aires.

Heinrich Tiedemann, 1991. Hamburg.

The Schoemaker family, 2020. Illinois.

Each name a branch cut from the tree. Each death a necessary pruning.

Rossini stepped back and surveyed his work. The olive tree looked healthier already—its remaining branches straighter, stronger, reaching more confidently toward the artificial sun.

Two billion Catholics, he thought, gathering the fallen branches. Four billion Christians. All of them sheep who need a shepherd. Who need to believe their shepherd is divine.

The tree understood. The tree had survived three centuries in darkness because someone had been willing to cut away the parts that threatened the whole.

Rossini climbed the stairs back to his office, leaving the olive tree alone in its sunless courtyard. Behind him, the grow-lights hummed their eternal vigil.

The tree would survive.

It always did.

Is Jeremy Schoemaker's survival divine protection?

The thought came unbidden. Heresy. Blasphemy. But he could not dismiss it entirely.

Three assassination attempts. Three escapes. The odds were astronomical. Schoemaker had no military training, no combat experience. Yet he evaded professional killers with almost supernatural consistency.

What if I am fighting God Himself?

Rossini's hand found his mother's Bible. The pages fell open to Ephesians 6:12: *"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers..."*

He had always read it as justification. The bloodline carriers were the forces of chaos.

But what if he had it backwards? What if *he* was the ruler of darkness?

No. He closed the Bible. The devil's whisper. Doubt planted to weaken his resolve.

The Church had spoken. The bloodline was heresy. He had made peace with that calculus long ago.

* * *

The secure phone on his desk buzzed. Rossini answered.

"Eminence." The voice belonged to Marco, his chief operative, currently stationed in Jerusalem. "We have confirmation. Schoemaker landed at Ben Gurion Airport two hours ago. He's traveling with the Crawford woman and two Israeli contacts. Former Mossad, both of them."

"Mossad." Rossini's jaw tightened. "The Brotherhood's reach extends further than we anticipated."

"They're good, Eminence. Very good. Our surveillance team lost them twice between the airport and the Old City."

"But you found them again?"

"We have assets in the Christian Quarter. Schoemaker was spotted entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre thirty minutes ago."

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Of course. The clues in the amulet had pointed there all along. Somewhere in that ancient church, hidden by Templar Knights nine hundred years ago, lay evidence that could destroy everything Rossini had spent his life protecting.

"Intercept him," Rossini said. "Whatever it takes."

"Understood. And the daughters?"

Rossini's hand, which had been reaching for his rosary, froze in midair.

The daughters.

He had known this moment would come. Had dreaded it from the instant he'd ordered surveillance on Juliet and Joslyn Schoemaker. The girls were innocent. They knew nothing of the bloodline, nothing of the war being fought over their genetic heritage. They were children. Students. Daughters who loved their father and trusted the world to be safe.

And now Rossini was being asked to use them as weapons.

"Eminence? The daughters?"

"Wait." His voice came out hoarse. "Give me a moment."

He set down the phone and crossed to the small altar in the corner of his office. The crucifix his grandmother had carried from Naples watched him with wooden eyes that seemed, in the candlelight, to hold something like accusation.

Children. It has come to children.

* * *

He had known children among the carriers before. The Desrosiers family in Quebec, 2003. Luc had been eleven. Celeste had been eight. The boating accident that killed them and their parents had been quick, at least. Rossini had insisted on that. No suffering. No terror. Just a sudden end to lives that had barely begun.

He had vomited for a week afterward. Had nearly resigned. Had spent three months in a monastery in the Alps, praying for guidance, begging God to release him from this burden.

But God had been silent, as always. And Rossini had returned to his post, because someone had to carry the weight. Someone had to make the terrible choices so that billions could sleep peacefully in their faith.

Now he faced another such choice.

Juliet Schoemaker, seventeen. Honors student. Volleyball captain. Planning to study medicine, according to the surveillance reports. She wanted to be a pediatrician. Wanted to spend her life healing children.

Joslyn Schoemaker, fifteen. Gifted in mathematics and computer science, like her father. Still half-child, with braces on her teeth and a collection of stuffed animals on her bed. She had a dog named Max and a best friend named Sophie and no idea that men in Rome were debating whether she should live or die.

Rossini pulled the photographs from his desk drawer. The ones he had been avoiding for three days now. The ones that showed the girls as they really were, not as abstract threats to be neutralized, but as human beings with hopes and dreams and futures.

Juliet, laughing at something on her phone. The sunlight catching her hair.

Joslyn, hugging her dog, her face split by a grin of pure joy.

His hand trembled.

These are children. God's children. How can I...

But the voice of Cardinal Mancini, dead these fifteen years, echoed in his memory: *The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Two billion souls depend on our silence. Two billion souls who find meaning in Christ's divinity, hope in His resurrection, strength in His sacrifice. Would you trade their salvation for the lives of two girls?*

The math was simple. The execution was not.

* * *

Rossini returned to the phone.

"Eminence?"

"The daughters." Each word felt like swallowing broken glass. "Begin preparations for extraction. If Schoemaker cannot be stopped in Jerusalem, we use them as leverage."

A pause. "You're authorizing the ultimatum?"

"I am authorizing..." His voice cracked. He steadied it. "I am authorizing whatever measures are necessary to end this threat. The bloodline must be eliminated. If the father cannot be reached through force, we reach him through his children."

"Understood, Eminence. I'll begin—"

"Marco." Rossini's hand found his rosary, the wooden beads pressing into his palm like penance. "Make certain they understand the terms. Schoemaker surrenders himself and all evidence in his possession. In exchange, his daughters live. They will be monitored for the rest of their lives, prevented from reproducing, but they will live."

"And if he refuses?"

Rossini stared at the photographs of Juliet and Joslyn. Such young faces. Such innocent eyes. So much life ahead of them, if only their father would make the rational choice.

But he won't. He's a father. He'll fight to the end.

Which means the girls will die. And their blood will be on my hands.

“If he refuses,” Rossini said slowly, “then we do what must be done. But make the offer first. Give him the chance to save them.”

“Yes, Eminence.”

The line went dead.

Rossini sat motionless for a long moment, the phone still in his hand, the photographs still spread before him. Then, slowly, he reached for a pen.

The order had to be documented. Every action the Custodes Fidei took was recorded, witnessed, sealed in the archives for future Prefects to review. It was how they maintained accountability, how they ensured that no one acted alone, that every sin was shared.

His hand trembled as he wrote the words. *Authorization for leverage operation, targets J. Schoemaker (f) age 17 and J. Schoemaker (f) age 14...*

He stopped. Set down the pen. Closed his eyes.

I could rescind this. I could call Marco back, tell him to stand down. I could let Schoemaker win, let the truth come out, let the world learn that Jesus had children and watch what happens.

For one moment, one terrible moment, he almost did it.

Then he thought of his mother, dying in her small apartment in Naples, clutching her rosary with hands that could no longer feel. *“I am not afraid. I go to meet my Savior.”*

He thought of the children in the favelas, smiling as they died because they believed Jesus was waiting for them.

He thought of the village in Kenya, the bodies stacked like firewood, the chaos that erupted when faith collapsed.

This is why we exist. This is why I exist. To carry the sins so that others need not. To make the terrible choices so that billions can believe.

Rossini opened his eyes, picked up the pen, and finished signing the order.

His hand did not tremble.

* * *

Private Chapel

4:23 AM

Sleep would not come.

Rossini descended the ancient stone steps to his private chapel, the order for the daughters folded in his pocket. The air was cold, damp, thick with centuries of prayers and sins.

He knelt before the crucifix. Pulled the photographs from his pocket. Juliet. Joslyn. Their faces blurred through the tears he refused to shed.

“May God forgive me,” he whispered. “May He forgive us all.”

The candle flickered. The crucifix watched. And God, as always, said nothing.

He kissed each photograph, then climbed the stairs to his office. The orders for Jerusalem sat on his desk. He reached for the send button.

His secure phone erupted.

Marco’s voice, tight with panic: “Eminence. Jerusalem. Schoemaker found something in the Chapel of Adam. He’s—”

The line went dead.

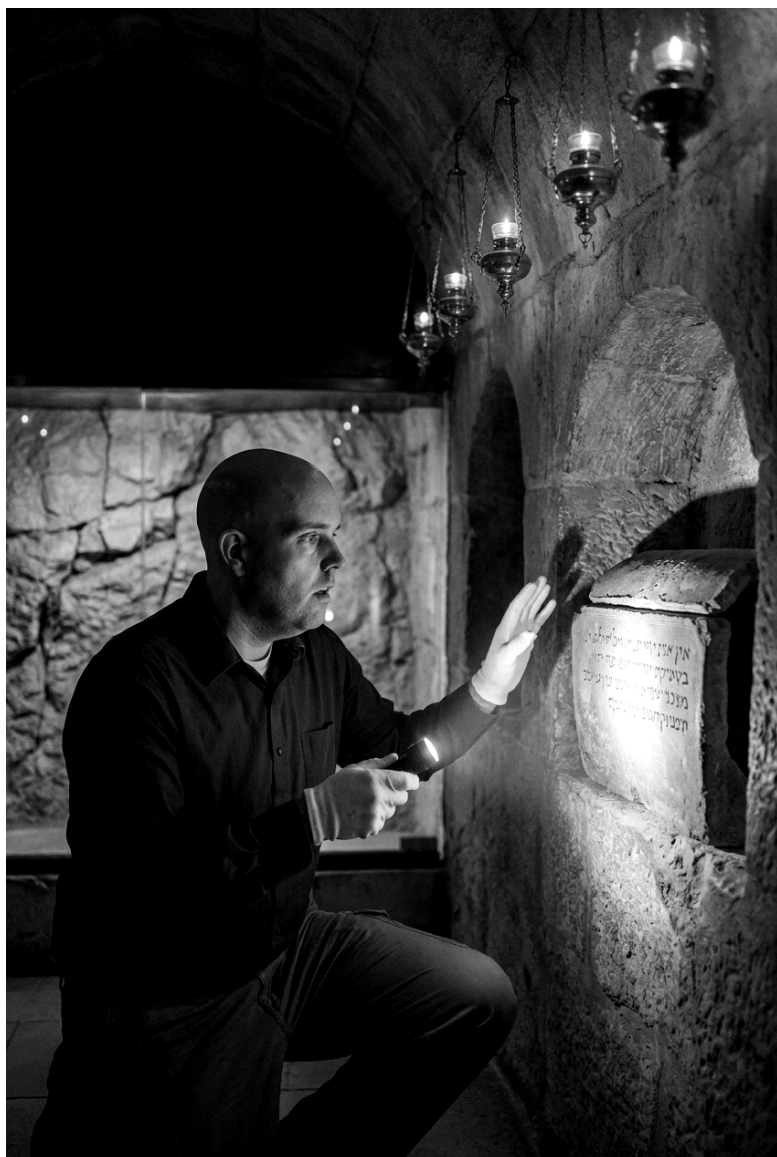
* * *

CHAPTER 12: THE

CHAPEL OF ADAM

Jerusalem, Israel

December 3, 2020



Jerusalem spiraled around Jeremy—chaos devouring beauty, modernity clashing against ancient stone, the sacred and profane bleeding together in streets that twisted like a labyrinth carved from two thousand years of blood and prayer.

The December heat pressed down despite the season, dry and relentless, carrying the scent of cardamom from nearby coffee vendors, diesel exhaust from tour buses, and something older—dust and jasmine and the mineral tang of limestone baking in the sun. Church bells competed with the muezzin's call from a distant minaret. The Old City hummed with a thousand languages, a thousand prayers, a thousand footsteps echoing off walls that had witnessed crusades and pilgrimages and now this: an American tech entrepreneur hunting for proof that God had fathered children.

He stared at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Christian Quarter. The site where tradition held Jesus was crucified and buried. His pulse hammered in his throat. Somewhere in this ancient maze, the Custodes Fidei were waiting. Their seventy-two-hour ultimatum in Hamburg had been a bluff—psychological warfare that hadn't worked. But the surveillance photos of his daughters kept coming. The implied threat was real enough.

And according to the amulet's clues, somewhere within this church, hidden by Crusader Knights Templar in the 12th century, was physical evidence of the bloodline.

"This is madness," Brennan said. He'd insisted on accompanying Jeremy to Jerusalem, along with Crawford and two Israeli Freemasons who served as local guides—Avi and Moshe, both former Mossad, both built like tanks. "The church is watched constantly. Custodes Fidei have eyes everywhere."

"Then we'll have to be clever," Jeremy said.

They entered the church as part of a tour group. Thousands of pilgrims visited every day; five more faces wouldn't stand out.

The clue on the amulet pointed to the Chapel of Adam, a small chamber directly beneath the traditional site of Calvary. According to legend, Adam's skull was buried here, and Christ's blood dripped down through a crack in the rock to baptize the first man.

Symbolic. Perfect for hiding something in plain sight.

The chapel was tiny, barely ten feet across, carved into bedrock. A window in the wall showed the crack in the rock. Jeremy knelt, pretending to pray, and examined the stones around the window.

There. A stone slightly out of alignment. And carved into its edge, almost invisible unless you knew to look: the Templar cross.

Jeremy pressed the stone. It shifted slightly.

Behind him, Crawford coughed—a warning signal.

Jeremy glanced back. Two men in dark suits had entered the chapel. They weren't tourists.

"Brother Schoemaker," one of them said in accented English. "You will come with us. Now."

"I don't think so," Jeremy said.

The man's hand moved to his jacket.

But Crawford was faster. She stepped between Jeremy and the men, her own weapon suddenly visible.

"Walk away," she said quietly. "This is not your jurisdiction. The Israeli police would be very interested to know that armed Vatican operatives are threatening American citizens in a holy site."

The standoff lasted an eternity.

Then the two men backed away, disappeared into the crowd.

"You have about sixty seconds," Crawford said. "Do whatever you came to do."

Jeremy turned back to the stone, pushed harder. It slid inward, revealing a tiny hollow.

Inside: a silver reliquary, no bigger than a ring box.

Jeremy grabbed it, pocketed it, pushed the stone back into place.

"GO!"

They burst through the chapel entrance. The crowd of pilgrims had thickened. Good cover. Bad for speed.

Jeremy's heart hammered against his ribs.

Behind them, a shout. Then another. The two suits had returned. And they'd brought friends. Six of them. Maybe more.

Crawford shoved Jeremy forward. "Move! Don't look back!"

They pushed through the rotunda, past the Aedicule—the shrine over Christ's tomb—past tourists snapping photos with their phones. Jeremy's legs burned as he sprinted up ancient stone stairs, through an archway, into a narrow corridor he'd never seen before.

Avi led. Moshe guarded the rear.

"Left!" Avi barked.

They careened around a corner. The passage narrowed. Walls of Jerusalem stone pressed close on either side, cold and damp, carved by hands dead for centuries.

A bullet sparked off the wall beside Jeremy's head.

Stone fragments peppered his cheek. Hot. Sharp. He tasted blood.

He flinched. Kept running. His lungs screamed for air.

"They're shooting!" Brennan gasped. "In a church!"

"They don't care," Crawford said. "This ends here for them. One way or another."

Another shot. Moshe grunted. Jeremy glanced back and saw the big Israeli stumble, clutching his shoulder. Blood seeped between his fingers, dark and thick.

"Keep moving!" Moshe growled through gritted teeth. "I'll hold them!"

He turned, raised his weapon, and opened fire back down the corridor. The thunder of gunshots in the confined space was deafening. Jeremy's ears rang. Spent casings clattered against stone.

Avi grabbed Jeremy's arm and hauled him forward. They crashed through a wooden door, splintering it off its hinges, and emerged onto a rooftop.

Jerusalem spread before them. The Dome of the Rock gleamed gold in the afternoon sun. The Mount of Olives rose in the distance. And below, the labyrinthine streets of the Old City—their only hope of escape.

“There!” Avi pointed to an adjacent roof, three feet lower. “Jump!”

Jeremy didn’t think. He jumped.

His feet hit the stone hard. Pain shot through his ankles. He rolled, scrambled up, felt something tear in his shoulder.

Crawford landed beside him. Then Brennan, who hit badly and cried out.

“My ankle—”

“No time!” Crawford hauled him upright, threw his arm over her shoulder.

Behind them, the door they’d crashed through burst open again. Three operatives in tactical gear spilled onto the rooftop. Assault rifles. Body armor. Night-vision goggles pushed up on their foreheads.

These weren’t Vatican suits. These were killers.

“STOP!”

Jeremy ran.

They leaped from roof to roof, a desperate parkour chase across the skyline of the Old City. Clotheslines snapped as they crashed through. A satellite dish shattered under Jeremy’s foot. Somewhere below, people screamed.

A bullet whined past his ear, close enough to feel the displaced air. Another punched through a water tank beside him, spraying his face with warm water.

His lungs burned. His legs were rubber. He was forty-four years old and hadn’t run like this since—

Since never. He’d never run like this.

Avi suddenly stopped. “Here!”

A hole in the roof. An iron ladder descending into darkness.

“What is this?” Jeremy gasped.

“Crusader tunnel. Goes under the walls. Move!”

Jeremy dropped into the hole, his feet finding the rungs by instinct. The iron was ancient, rusted, cold under his palms. Flakes of rust bit into his skin. He descended into blackness.

The smell hit him first—mold, decay, centuries of stagnant air. Then the cold, seeping into his bones like ice water.

Crawford came down next, then Brennan, half-falling, his injured ankle making him clumsy on the ladder.

Avi was last. He pulled something from his belt—a flashbang—and tossed it up through the hole as he dropped.

“COVER! EYES!”

Jeremy squeezed his eyes shut and threw himself flat.

The detonation was blinding even through his eyelids—a thunderclap of light and sound designed to disorient, not kill. Debris rained down. Dust filled Jeremy’s lungs, thick and choking. His ears rang with a high-pitched whine.

“That buys us maybe two minutes,” Avi said, coughing. He switched on a flashlight. “Follow me. Stay close. Do not stop.”

They ran through the tunnel. Ancient stone. Templar crosses carved into the walls every fifty feet—markers for those who knew. The floor was uneven, treacherous, slick with moisture.

Jeremy’s foot caught on something. He looked down.

A bone. Human. Yellowed with age.

He stumbled. Crawford caught him.

“Focus! Keep moving!”

The tunnel branched. Left or right.

Avi didn’t hesitate. Left.

Behind them, voices echoed. Arabic. Italian. The scrape of boots on stone. They were still coming.

The tunnel narrowed. Then narrowed again. Jeremy had to turn sideways to squeeze through.

His chest tightened. Claustrophobia clawed at his mind. The walls pressed in. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't—

Stone scraped his back. His chest. The reliquary dug into his hip.

Keep moving. Keep moving. Keep—

"Almost there!" Avi's voice, somewhere ahead.

One more turn. Jeremy scraped through, leaving skin on the stone.

The tunnel opened into a chamber.

A door. Iron-banded, ancient, massive.

Avi shouldered it open with a grunt.

Sunlight.

They emerged into a garden. Olive trees. Stone walls covered in ivy. The smell of jasmine, impossibly sweet after the tunnel's rot.

And beyond, the streets of the Muslim Quarter.

A car waited at the curb. Engine running. Driver in sunglasses.

They piled in. Avi floored it before the doors were closed.

Jeremy collapsed against the seat, gasping, his heart trying to pound its way out of his chest. His hands shook. His shirt was soaked with sweat and spotted with Brennan's blood. His cheek burned where the stone fragments had cut him.

Behind them, three men in tactical gear burst from the garden—but they were too late. The car was already disappearing into the maze of Jerusalem's streets.

Time was running out. The Custodes' deadline loomed over everything.

They made it to Ben Gurion Airport in three hours, taking a circuitous route, switching vehicles twice, doubling back through neighborhoods that looked identical to Jeremy's American eyes. Crawford cleaned and bandaged Brennan's ankle in the back of one car while Avi drove like a man possessed.

Halfway to the airport, Avi's phone buzzed. He read the message and exhaled—the first sign of relief Jeremy had seen from him.

"Moshe's out," Avi said. "Shoulder wound was through-and-through. The Brothers extracted him through the Armenian Quarter while we drew the pursuit. He's already at Hadassah Hospital. Going to be fine."

Jeremy felt something unknot in his chest. One more person who'd risked everything for him—and survived.

On the plane—a private charter, arranged by the Israeli Lodge—Jeremy finally allowed himself to breathe.

He pulled the reliquary from his pocket. His fingers trembled as he opened it.

Inside was a single object: a small clay tablet, covered in ancient Aramaic script.

Brennan stared at it. "Do you know what this is?"

"No idea."

"It's an ossuary inscription. In the first century, Jews would bury their dead in caves, let the bodies decompose, then collect the bones in stone boxes called ossuaries. This..." He pointed to the text. "The script looks genuine, but I can't read Aramaic."

Jeremy pulled out the burner phone. "I know someone who's been studying ancient languages for the past week."

Three rings. Then Joslyn's voice, exhausted but alert: "Dad?"

"I need your puzzle brain, honey. Sending you an image."

He photographed the tablet, sent it through an encrypted channel.

Thirty seconds of silence. Then Joslyn: "Oh my God. Dad, this is first-century Aramaic. The letterforms, the way they're carved—it matches examples I found from ossuary inscriptions in the Israel Museum database."

"Can you read it?"

“Give me a minute.” Typing sounds. “It’s a patronymic formula. Standard burial inscription format. It says... ‘Sarah, daughter of Yeshua and Miriam.’ But there’s more. There’s a secondary inscription, almost invisible, along the bottom edge. Most people would miss it.”

Jeremy turned the tablet, saw the faint scratches.

“It says *‘bat ha-melekh’*—daughter of the king. That’s not a normal addition to an ossuary. Someone wanted to mark this one as special.”

Jeremy met Brennan’s eyes.

Jesus and Mary. Their daughter’s name. Marked as royalty.

Physical evidence.

Two thousand years old.

For a long moment, Jeremy couldn’t speak. He stared at the clay tablet in his hands—this small, fragile thing that had survived empires and crusades and two millennia of silence. A daughter’s name, carved by hands that had known her. Had loved her.

I believe it.

The thought came quietly. Not triumphantly. Not with trumpets or revelation. Just a simple, private acknowledgment of something he could no longer deny.

He’d spent his whole life as a skeptic. Built companies on data and verification. Dismissed anything he couldn’t measure, test, replicate. And now here he was, holding proof that everything he thought he knew about his family—about himself—was wrong.

The transition wasn’t easy. Part of him still wanted to find the flaw, the forgery, the explanation that would let him go back to being Jeremy Schoemaker, internet entrepreneur, normal guy from the Quad Cities. But that door had closed somewhere between Chicago and Jerusalem. Somewhere in the tunnels and the gunfire and the blood.

He wasn’t normal. He never had been.

And suddenly, like a dam breaking, the memories flooded in. Every impossible survival. Every inexplicable recovery. Every moment when death had reached for him and missed.

The bicycle accident at ten—the handlebar that should have severed his femoral artery but somehow didn't. The car crash at nineteen—flipping three times on I-80, walking away without a scratch while the paramedics stared in disbelief. The server room fire at his first startup—trapped for forty minutes in smoke so thick he couldn't see his hands, but his lungs never scarred. The motorcycle accident on the Pacific Coast Highway—launched thirty feet into a ravine, landing on the only patch of soft ground in a quarter mile of rocks.

His whole life, he'd called it luck. Good fortune. Statistical anomaly.

But his father had known. Had watched each near-miss with something that wasn't relief but *recognition*. Had said, once, after the motorcycle crash: *"The blood protects its own, son. Always has. Always will."*

Jeremy had thought it was just his father being dramatic. Religious. Old-fashioned.

Now he understood. The blood didn't just connect him to the past. It *protected* him. Had been protecting him his entire life, preparing him for this moment.

Sarah, daughter of Yeshua and Miriam.

His ancestor. His family. His blood.

"Dad?" Joslyn's voice, still on the line. "You went quiet. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Jeremy said softly. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just... I believe it now. All of it."

Silence on the line. Then Joslyn, her voice thick: "Me too."

"You're brilliant," Jeremy told her. "Both of you. Get some sleep."

“Fat chance,” Juliet’s voice cut in. “We’re already working on the Rome coordinates. Joslyn thinks she’s found the specific shelf in the Archives. I’m running backup translations on everything.”

“Be careful.”

“You too, Dad.”

The line went dead.

“We need to authenticate this properly,” Jeremy said. “Carbon dating. Independent verification.”

Crawford reached into her bag and produced a small case—the kind Jeremy recognized from his wife’s medical practice. Sterile swabs. Collection vials. “Already on it.”

She opened the reliquary again, this time with gloved hands. Using a fine dental pick, she carefully scraped the interior of the tablet—not the inscription surface, but the small hollow on the underside where bone residue might have accumulated over two millennia of storage.

“What are you doing?”

“Ossuaries held bones,” Crawford said. “This inscription was once attached to a bone box. Fragments get embedded in the porous limestone. If there’s any recoverable DNA...” She sealed the swab in a sterile tube, then repeated the process twice more. “Chronos Genomics has a protocol for exactly this kind of sample. Ancient, degraded, contaminated. They’ll extract what they can.”

“How long?”

“Expedited? Seventy-two hours. I’ll have the results uploaded to a secure server. The girls can access them while we’re in Rome.”

Jeremy stared at the tablet in his hands. An inscription. A name. And now, potentially, the DNA of a woman dead for two thousand years.

“If the bone residue matches...” Brennan started.

“Then we have two independent samples,” Crawford finished. “The Shroud fragment from 1898. And now this. Two thousand years apart. Both matching the same anomalous markers.” She

looked at Jeremy. “Both matching *you*.”

The tech entrepreneur in Jeremy—the man who’d built companies on data, on verification, on showing your work—finally found something solid to grasp. Not genealogy. Not faith. *Evidence*. The kind that could be tested, replicated, peer-reviewed.

“We will,” Brennan promised. “But first, we need to survive Rome.”

The plane’s speakers crackled. The pilot’s voice, tight with tension: “Mr. Schoemaker, we have a problem. Air traffic control is ordering us to divert to a private airstrip in Cyprus. They’re claiming mechanical issues on our transponder—but we both know that’s false.”

Ice traced down his spine. He looked out the window.

The Mediterranean stretched below, dark and endless.

And there, rising from the east, two fighter jets. Closing fast.

“Those are Italian Air Force,” Crawford said, her face pale. “Custodes Fidei has friends in very high places.”

The jets flanked them, one on each wing. Close enough that Jeremy could see the pilots’ helmets. Close enough to read the tail numbers.

“What do they want?” Jeremy asked, though he already knew.

Brennan’s phone buzzed. A message on the encrypted channel:

Land in Cyprus or we shoot you down. The tablet stays with you. You stay with us. This is your final warning. - C.F.

The pilot’s voice again, strained: “Sir, they’re arming weapons. I’m picking up radar lock. I need an answer. What do I do?”

Jeremy looked at the tablet in his hands. Two thousand years of truth. His father’s legacy. His daughters’ future.

The jets edged closer. Their weapons systems hummed.

Thirty thousand feet over the Mediterranean. No parachutes. No way out. No time left.

The cabin pressure hummed in Jeremy's ears. His mouth tasted like copper. Fear.

Crawford grabbed his arm. Her grip was bruising. "Thirty seconds. Maybe less."

Through the window, Jeremy saw the missile bay doors on the lead jet slide open. Sunlight caught the ordnance inside. Death, gleaming and patient.

My daughters. If he died here, they'd have no one left to protect them. The Custodes would hunt them down eventually.

Avi moved first. His hand shot to the cockpit radio, yanking the frequency dial. "This is Israeli-registered charter November-Alpha-Seven-Seven, declaring emergency. Repeat, this is an emergency declaration. We are a civilian aircraft carrying diplomatic personnel."

The Italian pilot's voice crackled back, cold and professional: "November-Alpha-Seven-Seven, you are ordered to divert to Paphos, Cyprus. Comply immediately or we will fire."

"Negative, Paphos." Avi's voice was ice. "We are requesting emergency landing in Malta under Article 17 of the Chicago Convention. International neutral territory. You fire on us, you start a diplomatic incident that makes Lockerbie look like a fender bender."

Silence on the radio. Ten seconds. Twenty.

Jeremy's chest felt like it was filled with concrete. He watched the lead jet through the window, close enough to see the pilot's helmet turn slightly—consulting with command.

Crawford had her phone pressed to her ear, speaking rapid Hebrew. She looked at Avi and nodded sharply.

"Tel Aviv is making calls," she said. "Mossad station chief in Rome has contacts in the Italian Defense Ministry. They're working on it."

“Working on it isn’t good enough,” Jeremy said. His voice came out hoarse. “Those missiles are armed *now*.”

The radio crackled again. A new voice—older, authoritative. “November-Alpha-Seven-Seven, this is Italian Air Command. Hold your current heading. Do not deviate.”

Hold. Not fire. Not comply.

Jeremy exhaled. His hands were shaking.

Avi glanced back at him. “They’re stalling. Someone’s making phone calls that matter.”

Three minutes passed. The longest three minutes of Jeremy’s life. The Italian jets maintained their flanking position, missile bays still open, but they didn’t close the distance. Didn’t fire.

Then Crawford’s phone buzzed. She listened for thirty seconds, her expression unreadable.

“We have a deal,” she said quietly. “Malta. Luqa International. The Custodes Fidei get something in exchange.”

“What?” Brennan demanded. “What did we give them?”

Crawford looked at Jeremy. “A copy of the documents. Not the originals—they know we’d never agree to that. But high-resolution photographs of the genealogical chart from Chicago and the Tiedemann journal. Enough to verify what we have.”

“You gave them our proof?” Jeremy’s voice rose.

“I gave them *copies* of our proof. They already knew what we were collecting—this just confirms it. But more importantly...” She held up her phone. “It buys us landing rights in Malta and safe passage to Rome. The Israeli government just called in a very old favor with the Knights of Malta. Turns out the Brotherhood has friends in places even the Vatican can’t reach.”

Jeremy stared at her. “The Knights of Malta? The *actual* Knights of Malta?”

“Oldest sovereign order in the world. Predates the Templars. And they’ve had... disagreements with the Vatican for centuries.” Crawford allowed herself a thin smile. “Enemy of my enemy,

Mr. Schoemaker.”

The Italian jets peeled away, banking hard to the west. The radio crackled one final time: “November-Alpha-Seven-Seven, you are cleared for Malta airspace. This isn’t over.”

The pilot’s voice came through the cabin speakers, shaky with relief: “Beginning descent to Luqa International. Twenty-two minutes to landing.”

Jeremy slumped back in his seat, the tablet still clutched to his chest. His heart was still hammering, but something else was stirring now. Something that felt almost like hope.

“The Brotherhood,” he said slowly. “You mean the Freemasons?”

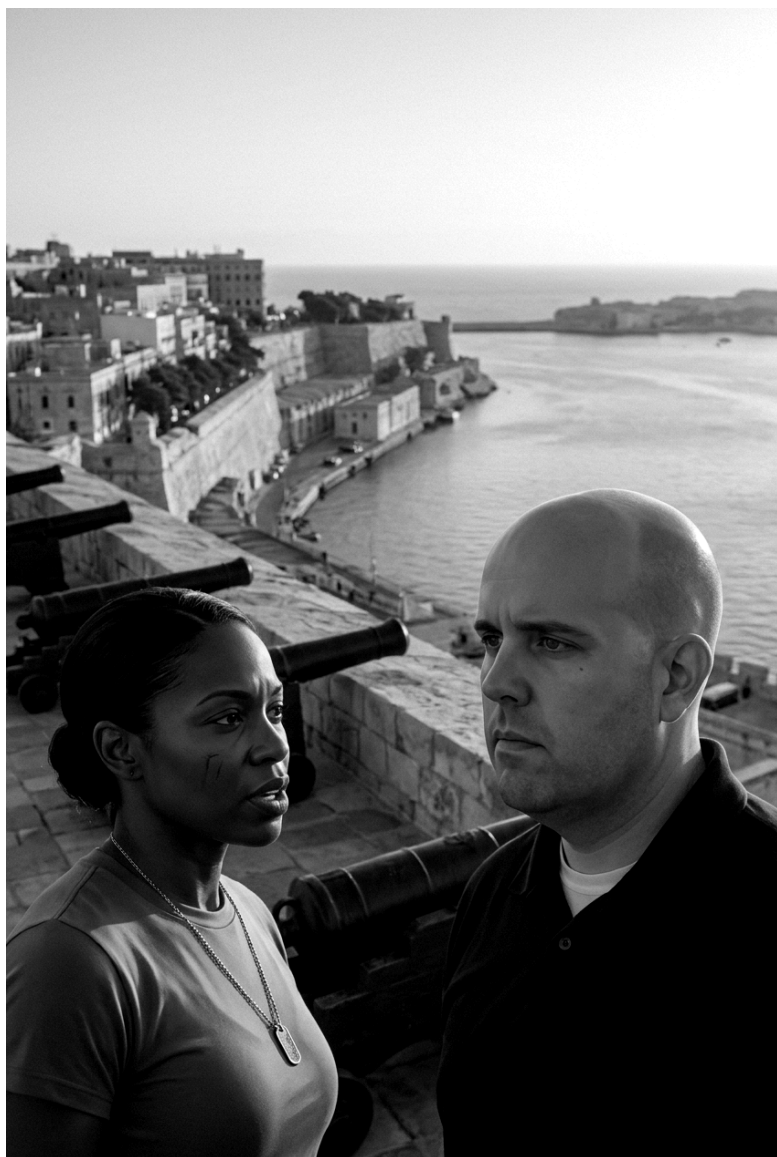
“I mean something bigger.” Crawford holstered her weapon. “There are allies you don’t know about yet. Orders within orders. Groups that have been protecting the bloodline since before your family even knew what they carried. The Vatican thinks they’re fighting a network. They’re fighting a *civilization*.”

* * *

CHAPTER 13: MALTA

Luqa Airport, Malta

November 28, 2020



Malta rose from the Mediterranean like a fortress carved from honey-colored stone. The plane touched down at Luqa Airport as the sun began its descent toward the horizon, painting the ancient island in shades of gold and amber.

A black Mercedes waited on the tarmac. No markings. Tinted windows.

“Three hours,” Crawford said as they deplaned. “That’s what we negotiated. Three hours on Maltese soil to rest, regroup, and arrange transport to Rome. After that, we’re on our own again.”

Jeremy’s legs felt like water as he walked down the aircraft stairs. The Mediterranean air hit him—salt and warmth, so different from Jerusalem’s ancient dust. He was alive. They were all alive.

For now.

The Mercedes took them to a villa in Mdina, the old capital, a fortress city that had stood since the Phoenicians. High walls. Iron gates. Armed guards who nodded at Crawford with recognition.

Inside, the villa was cool and quiet, the thick limestone walls holding the day’s heat at bay. The air smelled of beeswax polish and dried lavender, with an undertone of something older—centuries of incense smoke absorbed into plaster, the ghost of prayers long finished. Jeremy found himself in a sitting room with actual furniture—the first comfortable seat he’d occupied in what felt like weeks. The leather creaked under his weight, and he let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

Avi handed him a cup of strong coffee. “Drink. You look like death.”

“I feel like death.” Jeremy took a sip, let the caffeine hit his system. “Crawford... what she said on the plane. About allies in unexpected places. What did she mean?”

Avi sat across from him, his own coffee untouched. “The bloodline has been protected for two thousand years, Mr. Schoemaker. Did you think it was just the Freemasons? Just your father’s Lodge in Iowa?”

“I didn’t think about it at all until two weeks ago.”

“Fair enough.” Avi leaned forward. “The Knights of Malta. The Rosicrucians. Certain branches of the Orthodox Church. Even elements within the Vatican itself—not everyone who wears a cardinal’s hat believes the bloodline should be erased. These groups don’t coordinate. Most of them don’t even acknowledge each other. But they share one belief: that the truth matters more than any institution. More than any throne. More than Rome.”

Jeremy thought about this. “The Custodes Fidei—they’ve survived for two thousand years too. They must know about these other groups.”

“They do. It’s why they’ve never succeeded in ending the bloodline completely. Every time they get close, someone intervenes. A warning. A safe house. A phone call to the right person at the right moment.” Avi’s eyes met his. “What happened on that plane—the Italian jets standing down—that wasn’t luck, Mr. Schoemaker. That was a network activating. People who’ve never met you, who will never meet you, making decisions to keep you alive.”

Jeremy set down his coffee. His hands were steadier now.

“Why me?” he asked. “My father could have gone public years ago. Decades. Why wait? Why pass it to me?”

“Because you built something they couldn’t touch.” Avi stood, walked to the window. Outside, the ancient walls of Mdina glowed in the fading light. “Your internet empire. Your digital footprint. Your platform. Your father was a Mason and a small-town businessman. If he’d tried to go public, they would have silenced him quietly. But you—you have reach. Followers. The ability to make something go viral in hours. That’s why they’re terrified of you, Mr. Schoemaker. Not because of what you know, but because of how many people you can tell.”

Jeremy found Crawford on the villa’s terrace, alone, staring out at the Mediterranean. The setting sun painted the water in shades of copper and wine. She stood motionless, her hand resting on the stone balustrade, her fingers tracing something he couldn’t see.

“You should be resting,” he said.

She didn’t turn. “So should you.”

Jeremy stepped closer and saw what she was touching. Not the stone. A photograph, creased and worn, tucked between her fingers. In it, a younger Crawford—hair longer, face softer, wearing desert fatigues—stood beside a group of soldiers in front of an armored vehicle. The Afghan mountains rose behind them, brutal and beautiful.

“Kabul,” Jeremy said. It wasn’t a question.

Crawford’s jaw tightened. She started to fold the photograph away.

“My father saved your life there. You told me that much.” Jeremy leaned against the balustrade beside her. “But you never told me what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

She was silent for a long moment. The Mediterranean wind carried the smell of salt and jasmine. Somewhere below, church bells rang the evening hour.

“December 14, 2009,” Crawford said finally. Her voice was flat, military-precise, but something trembled beneath it. “I was a Captain with the 101st Airborne. We were running convoy escort from Bagram to Kabul—routine mission, three vehicles, twelve soldiers. I’d done that route a hundred times.”

She turned the photograph over in her hands.

“The IED hit our lead Humvee at 0847. Forty pounds of home-made explosive packed with ball bearings and scrap metal. Private First Class Danny Reeves was driving. He was twenty years old. From Oklahoma. He used to show me pictures of his little sister.”

Her voice didn’t waver. But her knuckles had gone white around the photograph.

“The blast flipped us into a drainage ditch. I was in the second vehicle—close enough that the shrapnel took out our windshield, our tires, our radio. I remember the sound. Not the explosion itself, but after. This ringing silence, like the whole world had been turned inside out.”

Jeremy didn’t speak. Didn’t move.

“I crawled out of the wreckage. My leg was... wrong. I looked down and saw bone. White bone sticking through my pants, just above the knee. The femur had shattered into three pieces. I didn’t feel pain yet—that came later. All I felt was this strange curiosity, like I was looking at someone else’s body.”

She turned to face him. In the fading light, he could see the lines around her eyes, the gray at her temples. A woman who had lived through things he couldn’t imagine.

“My team was scattered. Reeves was dead. Sergeant Mitchell was screaming somewhere in the smoke—I found out later he’d lost both arms. The others were either down or running for cover because the shooting had started. Taliban fighters, maybe fifteen of them, coming down from the ridge. They’d planned the ambush perfectly.”

“How did you survive?”

“I didn’t think I would.” Crawford’s voice softened. “I was lying in the ditch with a shattered leg, bleeding out, watching these men come down the mountain with their rifles, and I thought: *This is it. This is how Sarah Crawford dies.* In a drainage ditch in Afghanistan. Alone.”

She set the photograph on the balustrade. The young soldiers smiled up at the darkening sky.

“And then your father appeared.”

Jeremy’s chest tightened. “He was there as State Department.”

“That’s what his credentials said. State Department liaison, coordinating with local officials. But the way he moved—the way he handled a weapon—I knew he wasn’t any diplomat I’d ever seen.”

Crawford almost smiled. “He came out of nowhere. One moment I was alone, the next there was this big American with gray hair and calm eyes, kneeling beside me in the dust.”

“What did he do?”

“He told me his name was Robert. He told me I was going to live. And then he picked me up—two hundred pounds of soldier and gear—and he *carried* me.”

Crawford’s voice cracked. She covered it with a cough, but Jeremy heard it.

“A mile. Maybe more. Under fire the whole way. Taliban rounds snapping past our heads. He didn’t run—my leg couldn’t take the jostling—so he walked. Steady. Deliberate. Like he was taking a stroll through a park instead of crossing a kill zone.”

“That sounds like Dad.”

“He was hit twice. Once in the shoulder, once in the side. I felt the impacts, felt him grunt, felt his arms tighten around me. But he didn’t stop. He didn’t even slow down.” Crawford’s eyes were wet now. She didn’t wipe them. “I kept telling him to leave me. His cover was blown—I figured that out later. Whatever mission he was really running in Kabul, it was over the moment he broke cover to save me. He could have let me die and walked away clean. No one would have blamed him.”

“But he didn’t.”

“He said something I’ll never forget. I was begging him to go, to save himself, and he looked down at me with those eyes—your eyes, Jeremy, the same damn eyes—and he said: *‘We don’t leave our people behind. That’s not who we are.’*”

The sun had slipped below the horizon. The first stars were appearing over Malta.

“The extraction team found us in a bombed-out building half a mile from the road. Your father had stopped the bleeding in my leg with his belt and his bare hands. He’d taken two bullets and lost

three pints of blood and he was still standing guard at the door when the Black Hawks came.”

Crawford reached down and pulled up the leg of her tactical pants. Jeremy had seen her move—quick, efficient, deadly—but he’d never noticed the slight hitch in her gait. Now he understood why.

The scar ran from her hip to her knee. A twisted rope of white tissue, surgical scars layered over shrapnel wounds, the evidence of a leg that had been rebuilt piece by piece.

“Seventeen surgeries,” Crawford said. “Two years of physical therapy. The doctors at Walter Reed told me I’d never walk again, much less return to active duty.” She let the fabric fall back into place. “They were wrong.”

“How?”

“Your father visited me. Every week for six months. He’d fly in from wherever he was—Iowa, Washington, overseas—and he’d sit beside my bed and talk to me. Not about the mission. Not about what happened. About *purpose*. About what comes after.”

She picked up the photograph again, studied the faces of the soldiers she’d lost.

“He told me about the Brotherhood. Not everything—not then—but enough. He said there were people in the world who believed in something bigger than nations or armies. People who protected a truth so old and so important that generations had lived and died to keep it safe. He said when I was ready—if I ever wanted a purpose after the Army—I’d have one.”

“And you joined the Masons.”

“Not for the secrets.” Crawford shook her head. “I’d had enough secrets by then. I joined because of what your father showed me that day in Kabul. That there are people who don’t leave their own behind. People who will carry you through the fire, even when it costs them everything.”

She turned to face Jeremy fully. In the starlight, her expression was fierce and fragile all at once.

“That’s why I’m here, Mr. Schoemaker. Your father gave me everything. My life. My purpose. My second chance.” She reached into her collar and pulled out a chain. On it hung a ring—gold, worn smooth, inscribed with symbols Jeremy recognized. “He gave me this the day I took my oath. Said it belonged to his father, and his father’s father. Said it would remind me what we’re fighting for.”

Jeremy looked at the ring. The compass and square. The all-seeing eye. And around the edge, words worn almost smooth by generations of touch: *Lux e tenebris*.

“Light from darkness,” he translated.

“Your father taught me that.” Crawford’s voice was barely a whisper now. “He said the darkness isn’t something to fear. It’s something to transform. Every shadow is just light waiting to be born.”

She tucked the ring back beneath her shirt.

“I’m scared, Jeremy.” She’d never used his first name before. “Not of dying—I made peace with that in Kabul. I’m scared of failing. If I can’t protect you, if I can’t get you to the end of this... everything your father sacrificed was for nothing. The years he spent building the network. The mission he abandoned to save me. The bullet wounds he carried for the rest of his life.” Her jaw tightened. “I can’t let that happen.”

Jeremy thought about his father. The man who’d raised him. The secrets he’d kept. The weight he’d carried alone for so many years. And this woman—this soldier—who had dedicated her life to repaying a debt that could never truly be repaid.

“My father chose well,” Jeremy said. “You’re exactly who I’d want watching my back.”

Crawford's eyes met his. For a moment, the warrior fell away, and he saw the woman beneath—the one who still carried a photograph of dead soldiers, who still traced the scar on her leg when she thought no one was watching, who still heard the gunfire in her dreams.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Thank *you*." Jeremy put a hand on her shoulder. "For Kabul. For Chicago. For Malta. For whatever's coming next."

Crawford nodded once. Then the mask slid back into place—the professional, the protector, the shadow at his side.

"Get some sleep, Mr. Schoemaker. Rome isn't going to be easy."

She turned back to the Mediterranean, the photograph still in her hands.

Jeremy left her there, standing guard against the darkness, waiting for the light.

* * *

Three hours passed too quickly. Jeremy managed to eat something—bread and cheese, though it tasted like cardboard. He called the burner phone number for his daughters' safe house, got a single text back: *Safe. Working. Love you. -J&J*

Two letters. The most beautiful two letters in the English language.

At nine PM local time, Crawford gathered them in the villa's courtyard. A new vehicle waited—a nondescript van with Italian plates.

"Flight to Rome leaves in two hours from a private airstrip north of here," she said. "We'll be in the city by midnight. The Vatican Archives window opens at eleven PM tomorrow. That gives us twenty-three hours to prepare."

Jeremy looked at his team. Brennan, pale and favoring his ankle but still standing. Crawford, coiled tight as a spring. Avi, who'd risked his life and his career for a man he'd met three days ago.

"Why are you doing this?" Jeremy asked him. "You're Mossad. Israeli government. This isn't your fight."

Avi smiled—the first genuine smile Jeremy had seen from him. "Isn't it? If the bloodline is real—if Jesus of Nazareth had descendants—then those descendants carry Jewish blood. Israeli blood. The same blood that built Jerusalem, that wandered the desert, that survived every empire that tried to destroy us." He clapped Jeremy on the shoulder. "You're family, Mr. Schoemaker. Whether you knew it or not. And Israelis don't abandon family."

They boarded the van. The gates of Mdina opened, and they drove into the Maltese night.

The flight to Rome was short and uneventful—a twin-engine Cessna that hugged the Mediterranean coast before banking north toward the Italian mainland. Jeremy watched the lights of Sicily pass below, then the darkness of open water, then finally the sprawl of Rome itself, a constellation of orange and white spread across the ancient hills.

They landed at a private strip outside Fiumicino. Another car. Another driver who asked no questions.

By midnight, they were in Trastevere, in a safe house that smelled of old books and espresso. Jeremy stood at the window, looking out at the Tiber, at the dome of St. Peter's glowing in the distance.

The deadline pressed down on him like a physical weight. His daughters' lives hung in the balance.

But for the first time since Hamburg, Jeremy felt something other than fear.

He felt ready.

His phone buzzed. Unknown number. He answered.

“Mr. Schoemaker.” The voice was cultured, Italian, cold as Vatican marble. “My name is Cardinal Rossini. I believe we have matters to discuss. Your daughters are quite safe—for the moment. Whether they remain so depends entirely on what happens in the next forty-eight hours.”

The line went dead.

Jeremy’s mouth went dry. His heart slammed against his ribs, each beat sending a pulse of ice through his veins. The phone felt slick in his suddenly sweating palm. He stared at the screen—then at St. Peter’s dome, glowing in the distance like a promise—or a threat. The Tiber below reflected the city lights, beautiful and indifferent to the terror clawing at his throat.

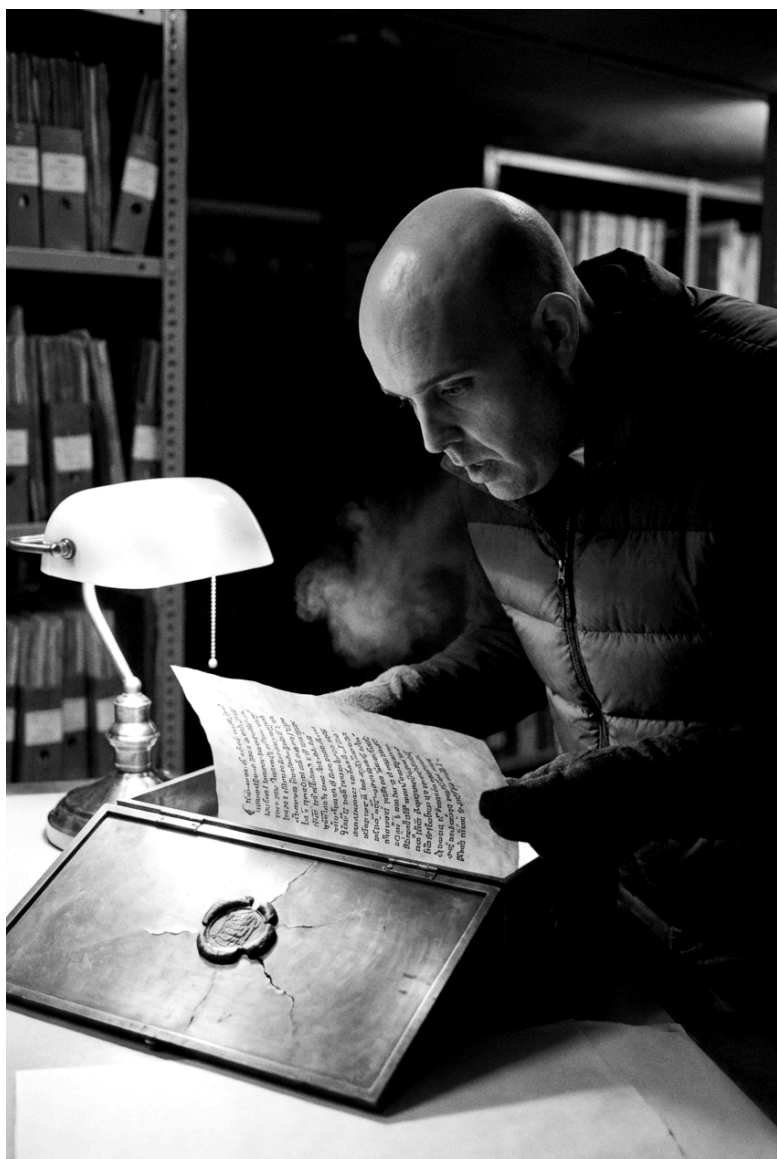
* * *

CHAPTER 14: THE

FORBIDDEN GOSPEL

Rome, Italy

December 10, 2020 — 6:47 PM



They had been in Rome for three days.

Maggie had cracked the amulet cipher on their first night, via video call from Dallas—decoding the biblical reference system that pointed to Section 147, Shelf 23, Box 7 in the Vatican Archives.

Since then, it had been nothing but planning, reconnaissance, and sleepless hours studying Brother Giacomo's blueprints.

Now, on the evening of December 10th, they were ready.

The Trastevere safe house smelled of espresso, old paper, and tension.

"We can't just walk into the Vatican Archives," Crawford said. They were sitting around a scarred wooden table, finalizing their last move. "It requires special permission, academic credentials, weeks of advance notice."

"Then we don't walk in," Jeremy said. "We break in."

Brennan laughed. "You've been watching too many heist movies."

"Maybe. But I know technology. And I know that every system has a backdoor."

The burner phone rang. Brandi.

"Jeremy, Mama sent a voice memo. Ninety seconds. She said you'd understand."

He set the burner on the table. Brennan and Crawford leaned in.

Maggie's voice filled the room—Texas-warm, seminary-precise, exhausted but lit from within.

"Jeremy, honey. The numbers on the back of your pendant aren't coordinates. They're a biblical reference system. Before the Vatican digitized everything, they catalogued certain collections by Psalm and Proverbs numbers. Section 147 is French ecclesiastical donations—secret societies and their influence on the Church. Shelf 23 maps to Proverbs 23: acquiring wisdom through discipline. Box 7 is completion. God's perfect number."

“Section 147. Shelf 23. Box 7. I’m sending the scan from the old catalog now. Three researchers have confirmed Box 7 exists. They’ve all been denied access. Whatever’s in it, the Church is terrified of it.”

A pause. Her voice softened.

“Luke 8:17—nothing hidden that will not be disclosed. The Lord intended this to be found, Jeremy. He chose your family. One more thing: Swiss Guard rotates at 11:15 PM. The maintenance access code resets at 11:30. That’s your window. God bless you, son.”

The memo ended. A photo from her arrived a second later: a yellowed catalog page with red ink circling **147 / 23 / 7**.

Brennan exhaled slowly. “Sunday school teacher cracks what we’ve been staring at for three days. God has a sense of humor.”

Jeremy smiled in spite of himself. “She’d say He always has.”

* * *

Brother Giacomo arrived at midnight.

He was a small man, early sixties, with the soft hands of a librarian and the haunted eyes of someone who’d spent too long guarding secrets he couldn’t share. He spread blueprints across the table like surgical plans for an impossible patient.

“The Vatican Apostolic Archive,” he said, his finger tracing the underground layout. “Eighty-five kilometers of shelving. Twelve centuries of documents. And the most sophisticated security system in Europe.”

“Except for tonight,” Crawford said. She checked her watch. “Our Berlin contact—Brandon Hamilton—says the security blackout window opens at 11:47 PM. Exactly thirty minutes before the overnight system diagnostic runs.”

Jeremy's head snapped up. "Hamilton? As in—"

"Your sister's fiancé. Yes." Crawford's expression didn't change. "You didn't think your father only prepared *you*, did you? Andrea's been working European operations for the Brotherhood for six years. Brandon joined when they got engaged. They're the reason we made it out of Hamburg alive."

"*Thirty minutes.*" Brennan shook his head. "To get in, find Section 147, locate Box 7, photograph everything, and get out."

"Twenty-nine minutes, actually," Giacomo corrected. "The first minute will be spent confirming the blackout is active. If it isn't..." He drew a finger across his throat.

Jeremy looked at the thermal imaging scanner on the table beside him—military-grade equipment that Avi had produced from a diplomatic pouch that morning. Next to it sat a multispectral camera capable of reading text through layers of degraded vellum.

Giacomo pointed to the blueprints. "The maintenance tunnels run beneath the Cortile del Belvedere. You enter through a drainage access point near the Vatican Gardens. Three hundred meters through the tunnel system brings you to a service elevator shaft. Climb two levels. The shaft opens into a storage corridor on Sublevel Three—where Section 147 is located."

"Swiss Guard patrols every twelve minutes," Jeremy said. "I remember."

He'd spent the past hours memorizing every detail. The patrol routes. The camera blind spots. The seventeen seconds between biometric scanner activation and alarm trigger.

His burner phone buzzed. A text from Joslyn: *Standing by. Encrypted link ready. Love you, Dad.*

Jeremy typed back: *Love you too. Stay sharp.*

* * *

29:47

On December 10, at 11:00 PM, they moved.

The Vatican Gardens were silent, the ancient trees casting moon-shadows across manicured lawns. Jeremy wore black tactical gear, a gift from Crawford's Mossad contacts. The thermal scanner hung from his belt. The multispectral camera was secured in a padded case across his back.

Crawford led. Brennan brought up the rear, limping slightly but refusing to stay behind. Giacomo had given them the access codes and returned to his quarters in the Apostolic Palace—he couldn't risk being seen outside during the operation.

The drainage access point was hidden behind a maintenance shed, covered by a rusted grate that hadn't been opened in decades. Crawford applied a chemical solution to the hinges. The rust dissolved in seconds. The grate lifted without a sound.

"Go," she whispered.

Jeremy descended into darkness.

The tunnel was narrow, brick-lined, heavy with the smell of stagnant water and ancient stone. His flashlight carved a pale cone through the black. Behind him, he heard Crawford and Brennan drop down, the soft splash of their boots in shallow water.

29 minutes.

His earpiece crackled. A voice—female, familiar, digitally scrambled but not enough to hide who it was: "Blackout confirmed. Security grid Sublevel Three is dark. You have your window. Clock starts now."

Andrea. His sister. Running point on the most dangerous operation of his life.

Dad, you magnificent bastard, Jeremy thought. You planned everything.

Jeremy checked his watch. 11:47 PM exactly.

They moved through the tunnel at a near-run, hunched to avoid the low ceiling. The passage twisted, branched, doubled back on itself. Three times they hit dead ends and had to retrace their

steps. Precious minutes bleeding away.

27 minutes.

The service elevator shaft appeared ahead—a vertical column of rusted steel rising into darkness. No elevator car. Just maintenance rungs bolted to the wall, disappearing upward.

“Climb,” Crawford said. “Two levels. Go.”

Jeremy climbed. Hand over hand. Rung after rung. The shaft was narrow enough that his shoulders scraped the walls. Somewhere above, he could hear the hum of ventilation systems, the distant murmur of the Archive’s climate control.

25 minutes.

He reached the Sublevel Three access hatch. A simple mechanical lock—Giacomo had given them the combination. Jeremy spun the dial. 7-14-7. The papal numerology of completion. The lock clicked open.

The storage corridor beyond was dark, lined with unmarked doors and climate control units. The air was cold—not vault-cold, but noticeably below the Roman summer night they’d left behind.

Crawford emerged from the shaft behind him, then Brennan. All three pressed against the wall, listening.

Footsteps. Distant but approaching.

Swiss Guard patrol.

Crawford held up a hand. *Wait.*

Jeremy’s heart hammered against his ribs. The footsteps grew louder. A flashlight beam swept across the far end of the corridor, painting the walls with harsh white light.

Twenty meters away. Fifteen. Ten.

The guard paused. Jeremy could see him now—young, athletic, dressed in the simple dark uniform of the overnight patrol rather than the famous Renaissance costume. His hand rested on his sidearm.

The guard’s radio crackled. A voice spoke in rapid Italian.

The guard responded, turned, walked away.

Jeremy exhaled.

23 minutes.

They moved through the corridor like ghosts. Past storage rooms. Past maintenance closets. Past a door marked ARCHIVUM SECRETUM—AUTORIZZAZIONE NECESSARIA.

The biometric scanner beside the door glowed red. Waiting.

Crawford produced one of Giacomo's cloned access cards. She pressed it to the reader. The light turned amber.

"Fingerprint required," she muttered.

Jeremy pulled a thin film from his pocket—a lifted print, obtained from a water glass Giacomo had carefully preserved from a senior archivist's lunch. He pressed the film to the scanner.

Green light. The door clicked open.

21 minutes.

Section Alpha.

The cold hit Jeremy like a physical force— -5°C , his breath crystallizing instantly into pale ghosts that hung in the sterile air. The temperature was precise, maintained by Swiss-engineered climate systems that had hummed continuously since 1947. The air tasted metallic, tinged with ozone and the faint chemical signature of archival preservation gases. Rows of metal shelving stretched into darkness, each lined with identical leaden caskets. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Every forbidden text the Church had ever suppressed, sealed away in lead—lead that blocked both radiation and, some whispered, divine providence.

"L-12," Crawford whispered. Her voice was tight. "Find it. Now."

Jeremy pulled out the thermal scanner and swept the room. The display showed the shelving grid in pale green, the caskets as darker rectangles. Each row was labeled with small plaques—letters and numbers, a system unchanged since the Renaissance.

He moved through the aisles. K-7. K-8. K-9.

19 minutes.

L-1. L-2. L-3.

The rows seemed endless. The cold was already seeping through his tactical gear, numbing his fingers, slowing his thoughts.

L-10. L-11.

17 minutes.

L-12.

Jeremy stopped. The shelf stretched before him, caskets arrayed like coffins in a lead cemetery. He counted: 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46...

Case 47.

It was identical to the others—a lead box roughly the size of a shoebox, sealed with wax that had darkened over centuries to the color of old blood. Not beeswax. **Cinnabar wax**—mercuric sulfide mixed with rendered fat, the color of cardinals' robes, used only for documents of the highest ecclesiastical importance. But pressed into the wax was a seal Jeremy recognized from his research: the crossed keys of the papacy beneath a papal tiara. And around the edge, barely legible: CLEMENS V PONT MAX MCCCXIV.

Pope Clement V. 1314. The year they burned Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the Templars.

15 minutes.

Jeremy lifted the case from the shelf. It was heavier than he expected—lead and secrets weighing on his arms, the cold of the metal biting through his tactical gloves. He carried it to a nearby examination table, set it down, pulled out a ceramic blade.

"You're sure about this?" Brennan asked. His face was pale in the dim light, his breath forming clouds that hung motionless in the frozen air. "Seven hundred years, that seal's been intact."

"Seven hundred years," Jeremy said. "And sixty-two generations of my family waiting for someone to open it."

He positioned the blade against the cinnabar seal. The wax was hard as stone, preserved by seven centuries of darkness and cold. He pressed. The blade bit. A hairline crack appeared, spreading across the papal insignia like a fracture in frozen blood.

Snap.

The seal broke with a sound like a bone cracking. Fragments fell away—not crumbling, but shattering, pieces of crimson wax scattering across the examination table like shards of fossilized silence. The smell hit him immediately: old paper, oxidized iron, and something else, something organic, like the must of a crypt that hadn't been opened since the Crusades.

Jeremy lifted the lid.

Inside, wrapped in silk that had once been white but had yellowed to the color of old bone: a scroll.

Jeremy's hands trembled as he lifted it. The vellum was impossibly fragile, thin as onion skin, covered in faded brown text. He couldn't read the language—not Latin, something older. The letters were curved, flowing, written right to left.

Aramaic.

13 minutes.

He set up the multispectral camera, hands shaking from cold and adrenaline. The device captured images across twelve different wavelengths—visible light, ultraviolet, infrared—revealing text invisible to the naked eye, reading through centuries of degradation.

Through the camera's display, Jeremy watched the scroll transform. Under visible light, the Aramaic text was faded brown, barely legible. But when the camera shifted to the 365 nanometer UV range, something extraordinary happened: the ancient **iron-gall ink** fluoresced, revealing hidden marginalia that had been invisible for seven centuries. And beneath the iron-gall, appearing only under the 700 nanometer near-infrared scan, a second layer of text emerged—written in ink that glowed with a distinctive **violet-murex** undertone.

Royal purple. The color extracted from Murex sea snails, worth more than gold in the ancient world. The color of emperors. The color of kings.

Someone had written beneath the visible text in the ink of royalty—a message hidden within a message, waiting for technology that wouldn’t exist for two millennia.

“Sending to Joslyn now,” he said, activating the encrypted uplink.

Three seconds. Five. Ten.

His earpiece crackled. His daughter’s voice, three thousand miles away in a safe house in Nebraska: “Receiving images. Dad, this is... oh my God.”

“Can you read it?”

Silence. Then: “It’s Aramaic. Old Aramaic, like the Dead Sea Scrolls. Give me a minute.”

11 minutes.

Jeremy photographed the entire scroll, page by page, section by section. His fingers were numb now, barely able to operate the camera. Crawford stood guard at the door. Brennan watched the countdown on his phone, his expression growing more desperate with each passing minute.

“Dad.” Joslyn’s voice again. Cracking now. “Dad, I’m translating this in real-time. It’s... it’s a gospel. A testimony. It’s called *The Gospel of the Beloved*.”

“What does it say?”

A long pause. When Joslyn spoke again, her voice was barely a whisper:

“These are the words of Miriam, called Magdala, she who was the Tower, the beloved of the Light, written in the forty-third year after the Passion, in the land of the river Nile, where we have found refuge from the shadow of the Eagle.”

9 minutes.

The words stopped him cold. Not the vault's chill. Something deeper.

"Keep going," he breathed.

"And the Light took the Tower as his own, and they were joined before the Father in the village of Cana, where water became wine and love became covenant. And the priests of the Temple knew not, and the Romans knew not, for the Light walked among them as a teacher and healer, and none suspected the truth that dwelt within my womb."

Crawford's head snapped toward him. "Jeremy—"

"Don't stop," he told Joslyn.

"The seed of the Light did reside within the womb of the Tower, and grew strong as the Light walked toward his destiny. And when the hour of darkness came, when the Light was lifted upon the tree, the Tower fled, as she had been commanded. For the Light had spoken to her in the night, saying: Seek the sands of the South, for the shadow of the Eagle cannot find the sun in the desert."

7 minutes.

"And so the Tower went forth into Egypt, to the place where the ancestors of the Light had once found refuge from another king. And there, in the house of believers, she bore forth the fruit of the covenant—a daughter, called Sarah, meaning princess, for she was the daughter of the King of Heaven made flesh."

Jeremy was shaking. Not from cold anymore. Something deeper.

"And the Spirit spoke to the Tower, saying: The blood shall endure. Through war and famine, through empire and exile, the blood shall endure. And none shall prevail against it, for it carries the promise of the Light, unto the ending of days. Guard the child. Guard the blood. Guard the truth. And when the hour comes, the truth shall set the world free."

5 minutes.

“Dad.” Joslyn’s voice was raw, stripped of everything but wonder and terror. “Dad, this is Mary Magdalene. She’s saying she was *married* to Jesus. She’s saying she was *pregnant* when he died. She’s saying they had a *daughter*.”

“I know,” Jeremy whispered.

He was staring at the scroll, at the faded Aramaic letters that had waited seven centuries for him to read them. His mind reeled through the implications. The flight to Egypt. The bloodline surviving through Sarah—Sarah of Magdala, the name that appeared in his father’s genealogies. The promise of protection, passed down through sixty-two generations.

The blood shall endure. And none shall prevail against it.

All those near-misses. All those moments when he should have died—the motorcycle accident at seventeen, the business rival who’d hired someone to kill him, the fire that had destroyed his office but somehow spared the one room where he was sleeping. The daughter who’d been airlifted to Omaha as an infant, saved by a pediatric cardiologist who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

“I’m not just reading about my ancestors,” he said, his voice strange in his own ears. “I’m reading *why I’m still alive*.”

3 minutes.

“We need to go,” Crawford said. “Now.”

Jeremy sealed the scroll back in its silk wrapping, placed it in the lead casket, returned the casket to the shelf. The wax seal was broken—there was no hiding that they’d been here. But the scroll itself remained. Let the Church keep their relic. He had what he needed.

The photographs. The proof. The truth.

2 minutes.

They moved toward the exit. Crawford first, then Jeremy, then Brennan. The cold was a memory now, replaced by the fire of adrenaline and revelation.

And then the alarm went off.

Red lights. Strobing. A klaxon that shattered the silence like breaking glass. Jeremy's earpiece screamed with static, then the German voice, panicked: "Security breach detected! Pattern analysis flagged the blackout as deliberate! They're locking down the sublevel!"

Crawford grabbed his arm. "We need to move. Now."

But it was already too late.

Footsteps. Multiple sets, echoing from every direction. The harsh white beam of tactical flashlights slicing through the red-strobe darkness. And voices—Italian, commanding, closing in fast.

Jeremy clutched the camera to his chest. The Gospel of the Beloved. Mary Magdalene's testimony. Two thousand years of hidden truth.

The footsteps grew louder.

Closer.

Closer.

* * *

CHAPTER 15: THE

RECKONING

Vatican Secret Archives, Section 147

December 10, 2020 — 11:49 PM



“RUN!” Crawford shouted.
They ran.

Through the vault door. Down the corridor. Past the storage rooms. Jeremy's lungs burned. His legs pumped. Behind him, he could hear boots—multiple sets, closing fast.

The service shaft. They had to reach the service shaft.

1 minute.

Crawford reached the access hatch first, yanked it open. "Down! Go!"

Jeremy dove into the shaft. His hands found the rungs. He descended faster than safety allowed, metal biting his palms, the camera case slamming against his back.

Above him, shouts in Italian. Flashlight beams slicing the darkness.

Brennan was still on the ladder. Moving too slowly. His injured leg failing him.

"Move!" Jeremy shouted.

"Go without me," Brennan gasped. "I'll hold them—"

"Like hell you will."

Jeremy climbed back up. Grabbed Brennan's arm. The old man's weight nearly pulled them both off the rungs. Crawford was already at the bottom, weapon drawn.

They hit the floor. Stagnant water soaked through Jeremy's shoes. The stench of ancient sewage filled his throat. Darkness swallowed them.

0 minutes.

The thirty-minute window had closed. Above them, the Vatican was waking up. Security forces mobilizing. Every exit being sealed.

But they weren't trying to exit. Not yet.

"Giacomo's secondary route," Crawford said, already moving. "The drainage tunnel connects to the Passetto di Borgo. If we can reach Castel Sant'Angelo—"

"The Pope's escape corridor," Brennan said. "From the Sack of Rome."

“Every Pope since Clement VII has kept it accessible. And Giacomo has a contact in the Castel.”

They ran through the darkness. Behind them, flashlight beams appeared at the shaft entrance. Shouts echoed off the ancient walls.

Jeremy clutched the camera to his chest. Inside it: images of a two-thousand-year-old testimony. Proof that the Church had hidden the most explosive secret in human history.

Proof that Jesus Christ had been a husband. A father. A man.

Proof that Jeremy Schoemaker was his descendant.

The tunnel twisted. Branched. They took the left fork, following markers Giacomo had described—Templar crosses carved into the stone, invisible unless you knew to look.

Behind them, the shouts grew louder.

Closer.

“Rossini’s men,” Crawford said. “They must have had assets in place. Waiting for exactly this kind of incursion.”

“Can we outrun them?”

“We’re about to find out.”

The tunnel widened. Jeremy could see something ahead—a grate, moonlight filtering through, the promise of open air.

And then a figure stepped out of the shadows. Tall. Armed. Wearing the distinctive uniform of Vatican Security Services.

“Mr. Schoemaker,” the man said. His voice echoed off the stone walls. “His Eminence Cardinal Rossini sends his regards.”

Jeremy stopped. Crawford raised her weapon. Brennan pressed against the wall, breathing hard.

The guard wasn’t alone. More figures emerged from the darkness behind him. Five. Seven. Ten.

They were surrounded.

“The camera,” the guard said. “Give it to us, and you’ll live to see morning.”

Jeremy thought of his daughters. Joslyn's voice, cracking as she read words written two millennia ago. Juliet's fierce determination. The constant surveillance photos. The ever-present threat hanging over their lives.

He thought of the scroll in the vault behind him. Mary Magdalene's testimony, sealed away for seven centuries. *The blood shall endure. And none shall prevail against it.*

He thought of his father. His grandfather. All of them, all the way back to Sarah of Magdala, princess of a kingdom no one knew existed.

Sixty-two generations. Two thousand years. All of it leading to this moment.

"No," Jeremy said.

The guard raised his weapon.

And in the distance, from the direction of Castel Sant'Angelo, Jeremy heard a sound that made his heart leap: the roar of a motorcycle engine. Then another. Then a dozen.

The cavalry had arrived.

His earpiece crackled. Andrea's voice, no longer scrambled: "Brandon's leading the extraction team. Follow the bikes. We've got you, little brother."

Jeremy clutched the camera—the evidence, the proof, the truth—and prepared to run.

They had what they came for.

Now they just had to survive the next five minutes.

* * *

Twenty-two minutes earlier...

Cardinal's Residence, Vatican City

December 10, 2020 — 11:27 PM

Cardinal Enzo Rossini's hands trembled as he watched the security feed.

The American had found the prophecy.

For forty years, Rossini had told himself it wasn't real. That the scroll was a medieval forgery, planted by Masonic conspirators. That the prediction about "the great network" was simply vague enough to be retrofitted to any era's technology.

But watching Jeremy Schoemaker read those words—watching him touch his pocket, the pocket containing a device that could indeed speak to all nations—

He knows.

Rossini sank to his knees in his private chapel, but no prayer came. His faith, which had sustained him through decades of morally questionable orders, suddenly felt as fragile as the ancient papyrus on his screen.

What if we've been wrong all along?

The question he'd spent forty years refusing to ask.

What if the Church hadn't been protecting faith—but strangling it? What if Jesus really had wanted to be remembered as a man who loved, and the hierarchy Rossini served had spent two millennia burying that simple, beautiful truth?

What if the institution he'd killed for was the enemy of everything Christ had actually taught?

No.

He crushed the doubt with practiced brutality. Ground it under the weight of two billion believers, of hospitals and orphanages and missionaries, of dying children who smiled because they believed.

The truth would destroy them. It would destroy EVERYTHING.

He pressed the radio button. "All units to Section 147. Archive breach confirmed."

His voice caught. He had to force out the next words.

"Terminate with extreme prejudice."

He crossed himself. *Lord, forgive me. I do what I must to protect your flock.*

But for the first time in forty years, Rossini wasn't sure God was listening.

* * *

Vatican Secret Archives, Section 147

December 10, 2020 — 11:28 PM

01:51

They were replacing the documents when the lights came on.

A screen above the Archive door flickered to life—a security monitor mounted in the corner, dark moments ago, now filling with the lined, ageless face of an elderly man in red cardinal's robes.

"Signore Schoemaker," Rossini's voice came through the speaker in Italian-accented English. "We've been waiting for you."

Jeremy turned. At the far end of the corridor, the heavy bronze door had swung open. A single Vatican Security guard stood framed in the gap, weapon drawn, advancing slowly into the chamber. More boots echoed behind him.

"Cardinal Rossini," Brennan whispered, his eyes fixed on the monitor. "Head of the Custodes Fidei."

On screen, the cardinal's gaze settled on the fragments in Jeremy's hands. For just a moment—a fraction of a second—his composure cracked. Something like fear flickered across his face.

"So," Rossini said softly. "You found it. After all these years. You found HER testament."

"You knew it was here," Jeremy said, addressing the screen. "You've known all along."

"Of course I knew." Rossini's voice hardened, the speaker buzzing slightly with the force of it. "You think I don't know what's in that box? Why do you think we've guarded it for two thousand

years? Every Pope since Gregory the Great has known. Every head of the Custodes. We are not hiding a bloodline, Mr. Schoemaker. We are hiding HIS WORDS. His desire to be remembered as a man.” The cardinal’s voice cracked. “Do you have any idea what would happen if the world read that document? If they learned that Christ himself asked not to be deified?”

“Maybe they’d finally understand what he actually taught,” Jeremy said.

Rossini’s laugh was hollow through the speaker. “You’re a fool. Two billion Christians believe in the divinity of Christ. Their entire faith—their hope for salvation, for eternal life, for meaning in this meaningless universe—rests on that belief. And you want to tell them it was all a misunderstanding? That Jesus was just a man who got crucified and stayed dead?”

“That’s not what she wrote. She said he might have risen—”

“MIGHT!” Rossini’s composure finally shattered. “MIGHT! A billion souls don’t stake their eternal salvation on MIGHT! They need CERTAINTY. They need to KNOW that death is not the end, that their suffering has meaning, that God himself walked among them and conquered the grave!” The audio peaked and distorted. “And you want to take that from them? For what? For TRUTH?”

On the screen, the cardinal collected himself, smoothing his robes with trembling hands. His voice dropped back to its cultured calm.

“You’ve led us on quite the chase, Mr. Schoemaker. Chicago, Hamburg, Jerusalem, and now Rome. You’ve collected all four pieces of your father’s puzzle. And now you’ve found the fifth—the one we never meant for anyone to find.”

Rossini’s image leaned closer to the camera, his voice low and intense. “I’ve seen the gulags. I walked through Auschwitz as a young priest and touched the walls where atheist regimes mur-

dered millions. I've seen the nihilism that sweeps through societies when they abandon God—the suicides, the despair, the emptiness. The Church is humanity's last bulwark against the void."

"Or maybe," Jeremy said, his voice steady despite the guard now twenty feet away, "truth makes faith stronger. Maybe people can handle knowing Jesus was human. Maybe THAT was the whole point."

"Can they?" Rossini's laugh was bitter. "You built websites, Mr. Schoemaker. I've spent decades watching civilizations. When the Soviet Union fell, their churches filled again—not because people found truth, but because they needed *something* to believe in. Take away the divinity of Christ, and what's left? A dead philosopher. A footnote. And two billion souls cast into darkness."

"That's your fear talking. Not your faith."

Rossini stared at him through the lens for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was almost gentle.

"You think I'm a monster. But I've dedicated my life to protecting something you can't understand—the hope of billions. I've held dying children in refugee camps who smiled because they believed Jesus was waiting for them. I've watched widows find the strength to go on because they believed their husbands waited in heaven." His voice dropped. "And I've read that papyrus you're holding. Miriam's words. 'He wanted to be remembered as a man who loved.' I've read those words a thousand times. And every time, I've asked myself: am I wrong?"

Jeremy felt something shift. The cardinal wasn't just a villain. He was a man in agony.

"Then let the truth out," Jeremy said quietly. "Let people decide for themselves."

"I can't." Rossini's voice broke. "I can't take that risk. Not with two billion souls. Not with civilization itself." He straightened, and when he spoke again, his voice was steel. "Perhaps I am afraid. But

I've done the math. The stability of civilization against the life of one family. The faith of billions against your truth. I've made my choice. And I've made my peace with God."

"Have you?" Jeremy held up the Testament toward the screen. "Or have you made your peace with disobeying Him?"

On the monitor, the cardinal's face went white. For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Rossini's jaw tightened. The screen showed him turn slightly off-camera to speak to someone unseen, then back. His voice came cold and final through the speaker. "Kill him. Right there, in the heart of the Vatican. An unfortunate accident. A break-in gone wrong. No one will question it."

The guard at the end of the corridor raised his weapon. Boots thundered closer behind him.

02:47

Jeremy's phone vibrated in his pocket. Less than three minutes until the alarms. Until the entire Vatican locked down. Until they were trapped forever.

Crawford moved, pulling her own gun, but there were too many of them—

02:31

And then the lights went out.

Shouts. Confusion. Muzzle flashes in the darkness—

Jeremy felt hands grab him, pull him backward, through a door he hadn't seen—

He tumbled down a staircase, landed hard, pain shooting through his shoulder. Above, the sounds of gunfire. Crawford shouting. Brennan yelling—

And then silence.

Jeremy found himself in a narrow tunnel, lit by a single flashlight held by a figure in a monk's robe.

"Follow me," the monk said. "Quickly. Your friends are holding them off, but we don't have much time."

02:17

“Who are you?”

“A friend. A Brother. Someone who believes the truth should be known.” The monk turned, revealing a face lined with age but bright with determination. “I’m Brother Giacomo. I’ve been a Vatican librarian for forty years, and a Freemason for thirty. Now run!”

01:44

They sprinted through ancient tunnels beneath Vatican City, passages that dated back to the Roman Empire. Jeremy’s lungs burned. His phone vibrated—one minute forty seconds. One minute until every exit sealed.

00:58

Brother Giacomo led him through a maze that seemed to go on forever—

00:31

—until finally they emerged in a parking garage beneath a hospital a mile away.

A car was waiting. Crawford at the wheel, Brennan in the passenger seat, both alive, both bleeding but functional.

“GET IN!” Crawford screamed.

Jeremy dove into the back seat. Giacomo squeezed in beside him.

They were on the autostrada headed north before the Vatican guards even knew they’d escaped.

“We got it,” Jeremy said, gasping for breath. “All four pieces. We got them all.”

“Good,” Brennan said. He was pressing a blood-soaked cloth to his side. “Because that was our last chance. They know everything now. They know what we have.”

“Then we go public,” Jeremy said. “We release everything. DNA, documents, the ossuary inscription. We tell the world.”

“Not yet,” Crawford said. “First we get you somewhere safe. Somewhere even the Custodes Fidei can’t reach you.”

“Where?”

Crawford met his eyes in the rearview mirror.

“The Grand Lodge of Scotland. Edinburgh. The oldest Masonic jurisdiction in the world. If anywhere is safe, it’s there.”

Brennan’s phone buzzed. He read the message, and his face—already pale from blood loss—went gray.

“Arthur?” Jeremy leaned forward. “What is it?”

Brennan didn’t answer. He just turned the phone around.

A news alert from the *Quad-City Times*:

BREAKING: House Fire Destroys Rock Island Home

Authorities investigating possible arson connection to earlier mortuary blaze

The world stopped.

Mom.

The word didn’t even make it past Jeremy’s lips. His mother’s house. The home he’d grown up in. The woman who’d raised him, who’d called him every Sunday—

Brennan’s phone buzzed again before Jeremy could finish the thought. He read it, exhaled hard, and gripped Jeremy’s shoulder. “She’s safe. Joyce was at the fellowship hall for the evening service. Brothers picked her up an hour ago. She’s already on a plane to her sister’s in Phoenix.”

Jeremy’s hands shook. The house was gone. His mother was not.

“Thank God,” he whispered.

Crawford was already on the phone. “This is Falcon. Priority one. I need eyes on the Schoemaker daughters. Lincoln, Nebraska. Now. Full protective detail until further—”

Her voice cut off. She listened. Her jaw tightened.

"Understood." She lowered the phone. Didn't meet Jeremy's eyes.

"Denise." Jeremy's voice cracked. "My daughters. Are my daughters safe?"

Crawford said nothing. She floored the accelerator.

"DENISE. Answer me. Are Juliet and Joslyn—"

"They're alive," Crawford said quietly.

Jeremy exhaled.

"But Jeremy..." She finally looked at him in the rearview mirror. "They're not in Lincoln anymore."

"What do you mean they're not in Lincoln? Where are—"

"We don't know." Crawford's voice was flat. Professional. The voice of someone delivering the worst news imaginable. "They disappeared from campus six hours ago. Both of them. No witnesses. No trace."

The autostrada blurred past. Rome falling away behind them. Jeremy sat frozen, the genealogical chart clutched in his hands—sixty generations of proof, two thousand years of sacred bloodline.

His daughters had the same blood.

And the Custodes Fidei had them.

* * *

CHAPTER 16: THE

EDINBURGH RITUAL

Edinburgh, Scotland

December 15, 2020

11:47 PM



The Grand Lodge of Scotland occupied a neoclassical building on George Street that most Edinburghers walked past without a second glance. Tonight, its windows were dark. But deep within its

stone heart, in a chamber that had witnessed initiations for two centuries, candles burned in ancient patterns.

Jeremy Schoemaker stood blindfolded at the threshold.

“You understand what you’re asking,” Arthur Brennan’s voice came from somewhere ahead, formal now, stripped of the warmth Jeremy had come to expect. “This is not a social club. Not a networking organization. Not a charity with funny hats.”

“I understand.”

“The Royal Art is an infrastructure of survival. For three thousand years, since the first stonemasons encoded their secrets in geometry, men have built networks to protect knowledge that would otherwise be destroyed.” Brennan’s footsteps circled him. “The Pythagoreans. The Essenes. The Knights Templar. The Rosicrucians. Different names. Different eras. But always the same purpose: to preserve what powerful men wanted buried.”

Jeremy felt hands on his shoulders. Guiding him forward. His bare feet touched cold stone.

“Your family has been protected by this network for sixty generations,” Brennan continued. “Now you ask to join it. To become not just the protected, but the protector. Are you prepared to take that burden?”

“I am.”

The blindfold was removed.

Jeremy blinked. The chamber was larger than he’d expected—a perfect cube of dressed stone, perhaps forty feet on each side. No windows. The only light came from three sources, each blazing from a different position:

To the **east**, behind an ornate throne, a golden lamp burned—representing the **Sun**, source of all light, symbol of knowledge and truth. The Worshipful Master’s station.

To the **west**, a silver lamp—representing the **Moon**, which reflects the sun’s light to illuminate the darkness. The Senior Warden’s position.

And at the **south**, a smaller lamp of bronze—representing the **Stars**, the countless points of light that guide travelers through the night.

Sir Malcolm Graham sat in the eastern throne, dressed in full regalia: white lambskin apron, blue sash, jewels of office gleaming in the candlelight. Around the chamber's perimeter stood perhaps thirty men, all in similar dress, all watching in silence.

"The sun rules the day," Sir Malcolm intoned. "The moon governs the night. And the Worshipful Master rules the Lodge—not with the sun's blinding authority, nor the moon's reflected glory, but with wisdom to know when each light is needed."

He rose from the throne and descended three steps to stand before Jeremy.

"You have been hunted by those who fear the light you carry. You have run. You have hidden. You have survived." His eyes were ancient, knowing. "But survival is not enough. A man who only runs is a refugee. A man who stands and protects becomes a guardian."

He produced a small leather case. Inside: a white lambskin apron, identical to those worn by the Brothers around the room.

"This apron is older than any crown in Europe. It has been worn by kings and presidents, by generals and composers, by men whose names shaped history. It represents the purity of purpose that separates the Mason from the profane world."

Sir Malcolm placed the apron around Jeremy's waist, tying it with practiced hands.

"You are no longer merely Jeremy Schoemaker, tech entrepreneur. You are now Brother Schoemaker—bound by oaths older than Christianity, linked to a chain of guardians that stretches back to the builders of Solomon's Temple."

The assembled Brothers struck the floor with their staffs. A single, synchronized sound that echoed off the stone walls like thunder.

“But understand this.” Sir Malcolm’s voice dropped, intimate now. “The Royal Art is not magic. It is *infrastructure*. Safe houses in fifty-three countries. Communication networks that predate the internet. Financial resources accumulated over centuries. And most importantly: Brothers who will die to protect the secrets entrusted to their care.”

He gestured to the men around the room.

“When the Templars were arrested in 1307, it was the Masonic network that smuggled survivors to Scotland. When the Vatican hunted the Cathars, we hid them in our lodges. When your ancestor Jacob Tiedemann fled Hamburg in 1838, it was Brothers who provided passage to America.”

Jeremy thought of his father. All those years of Lodge meetings, of secret handshakes and cryptic references. All those years, Robert Schoemaker had been part of this—not just a member of a fraternal organization, but a node in a network that had protected his family for generations.

“The Custodes Fidei have hunted the bloodline for two thousand years,” Sir Malcolm continued. “They have never succeeded in ending it. Do you know why?”

Jeremy shook his head.

“Because they are *one* organization. Powerful, yes. Well-funded, yes. But singular. We are *many*. We are everywhere. And we endure because we understand something the Vatican has never grasped: truth cannot be killed. It can only be hidden. And everything hidden is eventually revealed.”

He placed both hands on Jeremy’s shoulders.

“Your daughters are in danger. The Custodes have taken them. But you are not alone anymore. The entire weight of the Royal Art stands behind you now. Our safe houses. Our operatives. Our resources. All of it is yours.”

Jeremy felt something shift inside him. The terror that had gripped him since learning his daughters were missing didn't disappear—but it was joined now by something else. Something older. Something stronger.

Purpose.

"What do I do?" he asked.

Sir Malcolm smiled—a cold, warrior's smile.

"First, we find your daughters. Then, we end this war."

He turned to the assembled Brothers.

"The 62nd Generation has been initiated into the Craft. Let the word go out to every Lodge on every continent: the Schoemaker bloodline is under our protection. Any Brother who gives aid to the Custodes Fidei will be expelled and marked. Any Brother who helps protect the bloodline will earn the eternal gratitude of the Brotherhood."

The staffs struck the floor again. Thirty voices spoke as one:

"SO MOTE IT BE."

* * *

The ritual ended at 2:00 AM. Jeremy sat alone in Sir Malcolm's private study, nursing a whiskey he didn't taste, staring at the fire that crackled in the ancient hearth.

His phone buzzed. A text from Crawford:

We have a lead. Swiss Guard source says the girls were moved to American soil. Chicago suburbs. Custodes want to negotiate.

Jeremy's hands tightened on the glass.

His daughters. Alive. Within reach.

He typed back: *When do we move?*

The response came instantly:

| 48 hours. Brennan's coordinating extraction team.
Former Delta. Former Mossad. The best.

Jeremy looked at the lambskin apron folded beside him. At the square and compasses embossed in gold on its surface. At the symbols his father had worn for forty years, the symbols that now bound him to a brotherhood older than nations.

He wasn't running anymore.

He was hunting.

His phone buzzed again. Unknown number. He almost ignored it—but something made him look.

A video. Three seconds.

Juliet and Joslyn, blindfolded, sitting in metal chairs. A gloved hand holding a photograph of Jeremy—the same photograph from his company's website—in front of their faces. And a voice, Italian-accented, cold as a crypt:

"Your father is coming for you, children. But he won't arrive in time."

The video ended.

Jeremy was on his feet before he knew he was moving, the whiskey glass shattering against the hearth, the fire hissing as amber liquid hit the flames.

Forty-eight hours.

His daughter might not have forty-eight *minutes*.

* * *

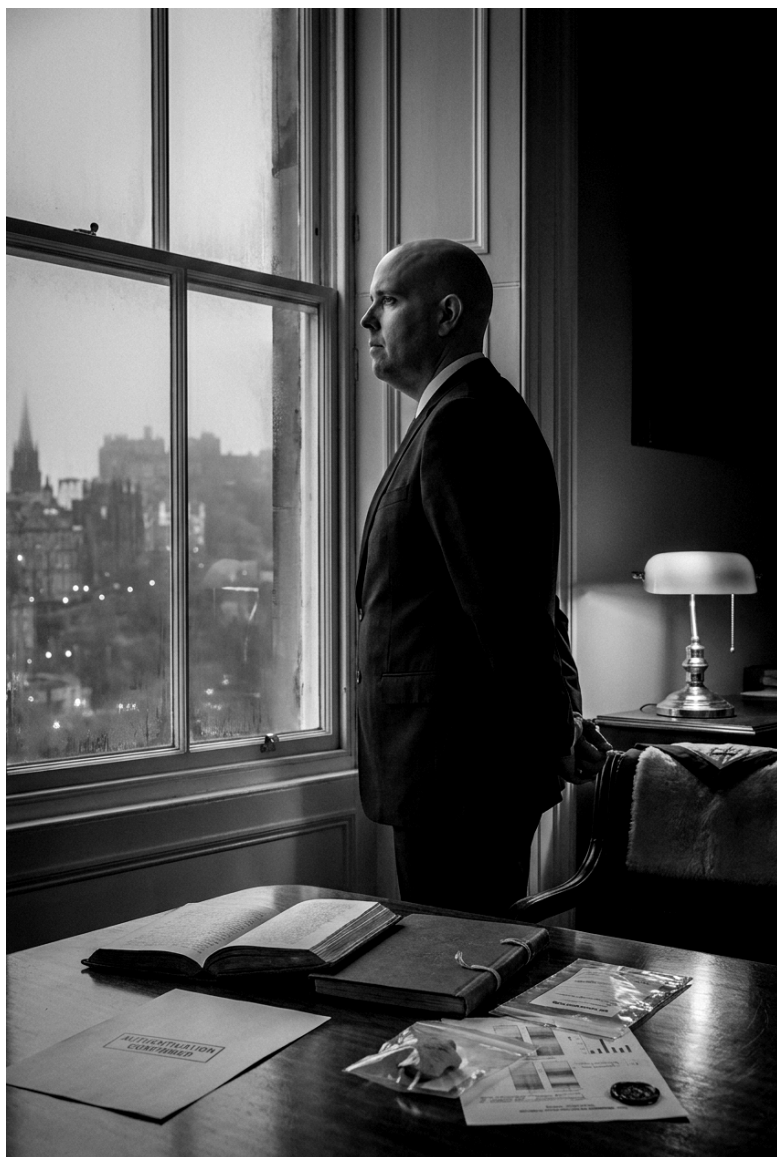
PART THREE: THE REVELATION

CHAPTER 17: THE

AUTHENTICATION

Edinburgh, Scotland

December 20, 2020



The Grand Lodge of Scotland sat on George Street in the heart of Edinburgh's New Town, a neoclassical building that had stood since 1858. Jeremy had been here for ten days, working with

forensic historians, DNA experts, and cryptographers to authenticate every piece of evidence he'd collected.

The results were being compiled into a single document: *The Sangreal Proof*.

On the evening of December 20, Jeremy sat in the Grand Master's office with Arthur Brennan (recovered from his wounds), Denise Crawford, and the Grand Master Mason of Scotland, Sir Malcolm Graham.

Sir Malcolm slid a single sheet across the mahogany table. Two words stamped at the top in red: **AUTHENTICATION CONFIRMED.**

"DNA. Documents. The ossuary. All verified." He met Jeremy's eyes. "You have proof."

Two thousand years. Sixty generations. Reduced to a single page.

"So what now?" Jeremy asked.

"Your choice," Sir Malcolm said. "Go public—or guard it, as your ancestors did."

Brennan leaned forward. "Either way, the Custodes won't stop hunting you. Ever."

Jeremy stood, walked to the window. Edinburgh stretched below, lights twinkling in the Scottish winter darkness.

He thought about his father. About the sacrifices of sixty generations. About the truth.

His phone vibrated. A text from an unknown number.

He looked at the screen and his blood went cold.

Two photographs.

The first: Juliet, walking out of her high school in Lincoln, backpack slung over one shoulder, laughing at something a friend had said. Behind her, barely visible, a man in a dark coat pretending to check his phone.

The second: Joslyn, in the window of what looked like a coffee shop, head bent over a laptop—probably still working on the cipher codes. In the reflection of the glass, another man. Watching.

Below the photos, three words:

| *Choose wisely. - R*

Cardinal Rossini. They'd found his daughters.

Jeremy's hands shook as he showed the phone to Brennan. The old Mason's face went gray.

"They're not just hunting you anymore," Crawford said quietly. "They're hunting your children."

Jeremy looked at the window, at Edinburgh's ancient streets, at the phone in his trembling hand. His girls. His brilliant, innocent girls who'd helped him crack the cipher, who'd stayed up late on video calls helping him piece together the puzzle. Now they were targets.

Then his jaw set.

"I'm going public," he said. "But not in a way they expect. And I'm going to destroy them before they can touch my daughters."

The window exploded inward.

Time fractured.

Jeremy saw it in frozen frames: glass transforming into a thousand glittering knives, Crawford's mouth opening in a scream he couldn't hear, Brennan's coffee cup shattering against the floor. His body was already falling—reacting before his mind caught up—and the second bullet punched through the wall six inches above his skull, showering him with plaster dust that tasted like chalk and death.

Then sound returned. All of it. At once.

"SNIPER!" Crawford killed the lights.

Darkness. Jeremy's heart hammered so hard he felt it in his teeth. Glass crunched beneath his palms. Warm wetness on his face—blood, his or someone else's, he couldn't tell.

Footsteps. Not outside. *Inside*. The hallway. Heavy boots, moving fast. Three sets. Maybe four.

The door didn't open—it disintegrated.

Muzzle flash strobed the room like a nightmare. Each burst burned an image into Jeremy's retinas: Brennan spinning, clutching his shoulder, going down. Sir Malcolm diving behind the desk. Crawford returning fire, brass casings arcing through the air, the acrid bite of gunpowder searing Jeremy's nostrils.

He scrambled toward the back wall, toward the hidden passage. His palms slipped on something wet and warm. *Don't look. Keep moving.*

A hand clamped around his ankle like a steel trap.

Jeremy's chin cracked against the floor. Stars exploded behind his eyes. He twisted, looked back—

The face above him was carved from stone. Eyes like frozen pits. The suppressor of a Glock 19 rose toward Jeremy's chest with the slow inevitability of a closing coffin lid.

"The bloodline ends tonight," the man said. His voice was calm. Almost bored.

Jeremy's phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn't need to look.

Checkmate. - R

The gun barrel pressed against his sternum. Cold metal. Final.

The assassin's finger tightened on the trigger.

Jeremy Schoemaker—sixty-first generation of the Sangreal bloodline, keeper of a two-thousand-year secret—closed his eyes.

He thought of Juliet. Of Joslyn.

And somewhere deep inside him, something ancient stirred.

The bloodline protects itself.

His father's words. He'd thought they were metaphorical.

Adrenaline hit his system like a freight train.

The world slowed. Not literally—Jeremy’s rational mind knew that—but his perception shifted into a state he’d only read about: tachypsychia. The survival response that made combat veterans report seeing bullets move through the air. His heart was hammering at two hundred beats per minute, flooding his muscles with oxygen, his brain with crystal clarity.

The assassin’s finger tightened on the trigger.

Jeremy’s eyes snapped open.

His body moved before his mind understood. His left hand shot upward—speed he didn’t know he possessed, muscles firing in a sequence buried so deep he’d forgotten it existed—and seized the assassin’s wrist. He twisted. The angle was wrong, all wrong, the leverage shouldn’t have worked, but he felt the man’s radius and ulna grind together, felt the tendons scream, felt the bones *crack* like dry kindling.

The gun discharged.

The bullet punched through the floor six inches from Jeremy’s skull.

The assassin’s face registered shock. Then pain. Then something else—*fear*. This wasn’t supposed to happen. A forty-four-year-old tech entrepreneur wasn’t supposed to move like this.

Jeremy didn’t give him time to process.

He surged upward, driving his forehead into the man’s nose. Cartilage crunched. Blood sprayed hot across Jeremy’s face, copper-salt flooding his mouth. The assassin stumbled backward, his broken wrist flopping uselessly, and Jeremy was already on his feet, already closing the distance.

Stop. You’re not a fighter. You’ve never—

But his body wasn’t listening. And suddenly, through the red haze of combat, a memory surfaced.

He was fourteen. His father had taken him to a cabin in Wisconsin for a “fishing trip.” But they’d never fished. Instead, his father had spent three days teaching him things that made no

sense: how to break a grip, how to strike the throat, how to disarm someone larger. *“You’ll never need this,”* his father had said. *“But if you do, your body will remember. The blood remembers everything.”*

Jeremy had laughed it off. Forgotten it by the time they got home. His body had never been athletic, never been coordinated. He’d been a geek, a coder, a guy who built empires with keyboards, not fists.

But now his father’s voice echoed in his skull: *The blood remembers everything.*

And it did. Sixty generations of warriors, of survivors, of people who had fought and killed and lived. All of them pouring through his veins. All of them guiding his hands.

His body wasn’t listening to him.

It was listening to them.

His right hand found the assassin’s throat. Squeezed. The man’s eyes bulged. His good hand clawed at Jeremy’s grip, fingernails tearing skin, but Jeremy didn’t feel it. Didn’t feel anything except the pulse hammering beneath his palm, rapid and desperate and *alive*.

The assassin kned him in the ribs.

Pain exploded through Jeremy’s side. The world tilted. He lost his grip, stumbled, and the assassin was moving—drawing a knife from his belt, blade catching the dim light, steel whisper-quick through the air—

Jeremy caught the blade.

His palm split open. Blood welled between his fingers. But he held on. Wrenched the knife sideways. The assassin’s wrist bent at an angle wrists shouldn’t bend, and this time the scream that tore from his throat was inhuman.

Jeremy drove his knee into the man’s solar plexus.

The assassin folded. Dropped. Hit the floor like a puppet with cut strings.

Movement behind him. Jeremy spun.

The second operative was raising his rifle.

Jeremy threw the knife.

He'd never thrown a knife in his life. Didn't know how. But the blade tumbled end over end through the darkness and buried itself in the operative's shoulder, just below the collarbone. The rifle clattered to the floor. The man screamed and clutched at the protruding handle, stumbling backward into the hallway.

The third operative hesitated.

That hesitation killed him.

Crawford materialized from the shadows. Blood streamed from her temple. Two rounds. Center-mass. The operative's body armor caught them, but the impact drove him backward. Into the ruined doorframe. Down hard. Crawford was on him before he could rise, pistol against his unprotected throat.

"Don't," she said.

He didn't.

Silence.

Jeremy stood in the middle of the room, chest heaving, his entire body shaking with adrenaline. Or something else. His palm throbbed where the knife had cut it, blood dripping steadily onto the hardwood, and his ribs screamed with every breath, and his forehead felt like someone had driven a railroad spike through it.

But he was alive.

The assassin at his feet groaned, tried to rise. Jeremy's foot came down on his broken wrist—hard—and the man shrieked and went still.

"Jeremy." Crawford's voice. Distant. Wrong somehow. "Jeremy!"

He blinked. Looked at her.

"We need to move. Now."

The window was a gaping wound in the wall. Cold Edinburgh air poured through, carrying the distant wail of sirens. The sniper was still out there. More operatives could be moments away.

“Brennan,” Jeremy managed. His voice was hoarse, ragged.

“Hit. Shoulder. He’ll live.” Crawford grabbed Jeremy’s arm, pulled him toward the back of the room. “There’s a passage. Old Masonic escape route. Opens into the tunnels beneath the city.”

She pressed something on the wall—a hidden catch—and a section of the oak paneling swung inward, revealing a narrow stone staircase descending into blackness.

“GO!”

Jeremy went.

The stairs were ancient, worn smooth by centuries of feet. He half-ran, half-fell down them, one hand braced against the cold stone wall, the other pressed against his bleeding palm. Behind him, Crawford helped Brennan—pale, breathing hard, but moving under his own power. Sir Malcolm brought up the rear, a pistol clutched in his liver-spotted hands.

The tunnel opened into a larger passage, brick-lined, the air thick with the smell of age and damp earth. Old gaslights flickered at intervals, casting dancing shadows on the walls.

“Masonic tunnels,” Sir Malcolm said, his voice tight with pain. “Built in the eighteenth century. They run for miles beneath the city. The Custodes don’t know about them.”

They walked for what felt like hours but was probably twenty minutes. Jeremy’s adrenaline began to fade, and in its place came exhaustion so profound he could barely lift his feet. His ribs ached. His palm had stopped bleeding but throbbed with every heartbeat. His head pounded.

They emerged in the basement of a church, St. Andrew’s in the Square. A car was waiting in the alley behind it, engine running, driver anonymous behind dark glasses.

Inside the car, as Edinburgh's streets slid past in a blur of rain and streetlights, Jeremy finally allowed himself to think about what had happened.

He looked at his hands.

The right one was unmarked. The left was wrapped in Crawford's emergency bandage, blood already seeping through the white gauze. But it was the blood on both hands—his own, the assassin's—that held his attention.

How?

He'd never fought anyone in his life. Never even been in a real fistfight. He was a tech guy, an entrepreneur, a man who solved problems with code and creativity and money.

He wasn't a killer.

But back there, in that room, something had taken over. Training he'd forgotten. Muscle memory buried so deep it felt like instinct. His father's voice, echoing across thirty years: *The blood remembers everything.*

Was it just the three days in Wisconsin? The moves his father had drilled into his fourteen-year-old body, finally surfacing when his life depended on it?

Or was it something more? The accumulated survival instinct of sixty generations, encoded in his DNA the way migrating birds know which way is south?

Or—the simplest explanation—was it just adrenaline? The desperate strength of a father who would do anything, become anyone, to protect his children?

Jeremy didn't know.

He wasn't sure he wanted to.

The car pulled into a private airfield on the outskirts of the city. A plane was waiting, a small jet with no markings. Brothers from the Scottish Lodge stood guard, watching the perimeter with military precision.

Before they boarded, Brennan pulled Jeremy aside.

"What happened back there." Brennan's voice dropped. "In that room. I've seen combat. I've seen men fight for their lives. What you did... that wasn't normal."

"I know."

"The bloodline protects itself. That's what we've always believed." Brennan's eyes searched Jeremy's face. "But after tonight... I think maybe it does more than protect. I think it *acts*."

Jeremy looked at his bandaged hand. At the blood of an assassin still caked under his fingernails.

"Is that a blessing?" he asked. "Or a curse?"

Brennan didn't answer. Perhaps he didn't know. Perhaps no one did.

They boarded the plane in silence. As it lifted into the dark Scottish sky, banking south toward whatever came next, Jeremy pressed his forehead against the cold window and closed his eyes.

His daughters were still out there. Still in danger. The Custodes Fidei hadn't been stopped—only slowed.

But for the first time since this nightmare began, Jeremy understood something.

The bloodline wasn't just a secret to be protected. It wasn't just a truth to be revealed.

It was a weapon.

Crawford's voice cut through his thoughts. "Jeremy."

He opened his eyes. She was holding up her phone, her face carved from stone.

"Rossini just made contact." She turned the screen toward him. A video. Fifteen seconds. Juliet and Joslyn in a concrete room, a copy of today's newspaper between them.

Below the video, a single line of text:

Seventy-two hours. Then we begin with the younger one.

* * *

CHAPTER 18: THE BELLARMINE

STANDOFF

Edinburgh Safe House

December 21, 2020

47 Hours Since Abduction



Jeremy Schoemaker stared at the burner phone in his bandaged hand.

The screen glowed in the darkness of the Masonic safe house—a converted warehouse on Leith’s waterfront. Gray concrete walls. Steel doors. The hum of industrial fans masking any sound from outside.

One new message:

Forty-seven hours, Mr. Schoemaker. Your daughters are beginning to wonder if their father loves them enough to save them. Do you? - R

Jeremy’s jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached.

Forty-seven hours. His girls had been in Custodes hands for forty-seven hours. While he’d been unconscious, recovering from the firefight at the Grand Lodge. While doctors stitched the knife wound in his palm. While Brennan’s shoulder was operated on by a Masonic surgeon who asked no questions.

Forty-seven hours of doing nothing while Juliet and Joslyn waited in some concrete cell, terrified, wondering if anyone was coming for them.

Crawford appeared in the doorway. “You shouldn’t be up.”

“Where are we on finding them?”

“Jeremy—”

“WHERE?”

Crawford’s expression shifted. Professional. Controlled. The face of someone who’d delivered bad news before and would deliver it again.

“We have a lead. One of our Brothers in the Swiss Guard—a double agent maintained for thirty years—intercepted a communication.” She pulled out a tablet, showed him satellite imagery. “Your daughters were moved eighteen hours ago. They’re no longer in Vatican territory.”

Jeremy’s heart hammered. “Where?”

“Chicago. Suburban location.” She zoomed in on the image. “Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat House. Catholic retreat center in Barrington. Officially a contemplative facility for clergy. Unofficially—”

“A Custodes safehouse.”

“Yes.” Crawford met his eyes. “They want to negotiate, Jeremy. That’s why they moved the girls to American soil. Easier logistics for an exchange. Less risk of international incident.”

Jeremy stared at the satellite image. White stucco buildings. A modest chapel. Manicured grounds surrounded by quiet suburban streets.

His daughters were somewhere in that compound. Waiting. Praying. Hoping.

“What do they want?”

“Everything. The documents. The DNA evidence. The ossuary inscription. Complete destruction of all proof.” Crawford paused. “They’ve given you seventy-two hours from initial contact. That was forty-seven hours ago.”

“Twenty-five hours left.”

“Yes.”

1,500 minutes. 90,000 seconds.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

“And if I refuse?”

Crawford didn’t answer. She didn’t have to.

* * *

Somewhere Over the Atlantic

19 Hours Remaining

The chartered Gulfstream cut through the night at forty thousand feet.

Jeremy sat in the leather cabin, laptop open, staring at the files his father had spent a lifetime collecting. Every document. Every photograph. Every DNA report. Two thousand years of proof, organized into neat digital folders.

His finger hovered over the DELETE key.

One click. His daughters would live. The truth would die. His father's legacy—sixty generations of sacrifice—erased forever.

The cursor blinked. Waiting.

Brennan sat across from him, arm in a sling, face gray with exhaustion and blood loss. His phone rested on the armrest—Jeremy had noticed him checking it every fifteen minutes since they'd boarded. Minneapolis. Eleanor. Sophie and Emma. His own granddaughters, who could become targets the moment the Custodes realized the Brennan bloodline existed.

"There's another option," Brennan said.

"I'm listening."

"We don't negotiate. We don't destroy the evidence." The old Mason leaned forward, eyes bright despite his wounds. "We attack."

Jeremy laughed—bitter, broken. "Attack a Custodes safehouse? With what? We're academics and businessmen. They're trained killers with Vatican resources and a two-thousand-year head start."

"Not all of us are academics."

Crawford's voice came from the cockpit doorway. She moved into the cabin, pulled up an image on her tablet. Eight faces. Eight names.

"Marcus Webb—former Delta Force, now a Brother in the Chicago Lodge. Samuel Chen—ex-SEAL Team Six, retired to civilian life in Milwaukee." She scrolled through the photos. "Two more Marine Force Recon. One FBI Hostage Rescue. One former MI6. All Masons. All bound by the same oaths."

"They've been gathering since we sent word about your daughters," Brennan said. "Ready to move on your order."

"Ready to die, you mean."

"Ready to fight. There's a difference." Crawford's voice hardened. "These men believe in what your family represents. They believe the truth is worth protecting. Worth bleeding for."

Jeremy looked back at the laptop. At the DELETE key. At his father's face, frozen in the video thumbnail—the video where Robert Schoemaker had asked his son to carry this burden.

Make me proud.

"I need a third option." Jeremy's eyes never left his father's face on the screen. "Something that protects my daughters AND preserves the evidence."

Silence.

Then: "What if we gave them what they wanted—but we didn't?"

* * *

Chicago Suburbs

14 Hours Remaining

The Custodes had provided an encrypted channel for communication. At 6:00 AM Central Time, Jeremy used it.

| *I'm ready to negotiate. Proof of life first.*

The response came in three minutes.

A video. Fifteen seconds.

Juliet and Joslyn sat on a narrow bed in a windowless room. Gray concrete walls. A single overhead bulb. Both girls looked exhausted—dark circles under their eyes, hair tangled, the same clothes they'd been wearing when they disappeared.

But they were alive. They were together. They were whole.

A copy of that morning's Chicago Tribune lay on the bed between them. Proof the video was current.

"Dad." Juliet's voice was steady despite the fear in her eyes. The same steadiness she'd shown when she was four years old and fell off her bike, refusing to cry even as blood ran down her knee. "We're okay. They haven't hurt us. Just... just do what they say. Please."

The video cut to black.

Jeremy's chest tightened until he couldn't breathe. His brilliant girls. His brave, brilliant girls who had helped him crack ancient ciphers and trace a bloodline across two millennia. Trapped in a concrete cell because of blood they never asked to carry.

He typed his response:

I'll destroy everything. USB drives, documents, photographs, all of it. But I do it in person. I see my daughters first. I watch them walk free. Then—and only then—I delete the files in front of your people.

Twenty minutes passed. Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

Then:

Accepted. Bellarmine Jesuit Retreat House, Barrington, Illinois. Tonight. 10 PM. Come alone. Any sign of police, any deviation from the agreement, and the bloodline ends with you.

Jeremy stared at the screen.

Think, he told himself. This is just another business negotiation. Different stakes, same principles.

He'd closed deals with venture capitalists who'd tried to screw him. He'd outmaneuvered corporate raiders who wanted to strip his companies for parts. He'd once talked a hostile investor out of a

takeover by restructuring the entire deal in the middle of a conference call. Every negotiation had the same underlying structure: understand what the other party really wanted, find the gap between their position and their interest, and exploit it.

The Custodes wanted the evidence destroyed. That was their position.

But their *interest* was containment. They didn't care about the physical documents—they cared about the information never reaching the public. Which meant they needed him cooperative, at least long enough to verify the evidence was authentic before they eliminated it.

That gap—between what they demanded and what they actually needed—was where he'd drive the wedge.

Then he forwarded the coordinates to Crawford.

"It's a trap," she said when she called back. "They'll kill you the moment you hand over the evidence. Standard Custodes protocol—no witnesses, no loose ends."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"Because I'm going to spring it first."

He pulled up the files on his laptop and began constructing what his programmer friends called "the nuclear option."

The **Dead Man's Switch** was elegant in its simplicity.

Seven encrypted servers, each in a different legal jurisdiction: Switzerland (banking privacy), Iceland (press freedom), Singapore (data protection), Estonia (e-residency shields), Panama (corporate anonymity), New Zealand (geographic isolation), and the Cayman Islands (regulatory arbitrage). Each server held a complete copy of the Sangreal Proof—every DNA report, every photograph, every page of the Gospel of the Beloved. Each was programmed with the same conditional trigger: if Jeremy failed to en-

ter a unique sixteen-character alphanumeric code every twelve hours, the servers would simultaneously release everything to seven hundred pre-selected recipients.

The New York Times. The Washington Post. The Guardian. Le Monde. Der Spiegel. Al Jazeera. The BBC. CNN. Fox News. MSNBC. Vice. BuzzFeed. Every major news organization on every continent. Every major scientific journal. Every theology department at every major university. Wikipedia editors. Reddit moderators. Twitter influencers. Even obscure conspiracy theory forums that would eat this story alive.

No single government could stop all seven servers. No court order could silence all seven hundred recipients. No amount of Vatican pressure could contain a story released simultaneously across every timezone on Earth.

Mutually assured revelation, Jeremy thought. If I go down, the truth goes up.

“They want me to come alone. I won’t. They want me to destroy the evidence. I won’t do that either.” His voice hardened into something that hadn’t been there a week ago. “But they’re going to *think* I did. Right up until the moment we take my daughters back.”

* * *

Bellarmino Jesuit Retreat House

Barrington, Illinois

10:47 PM

The retreat center was dark.

Crawford and her team had been in position for three hours. Marcus Webb in a parked van two blocks north. Samuel Chen and his two-man element behind the maintenance building. The for-

mer MI6 operative—a man called simply “Harris”—in the bell tower of a Lutheran church with a clear sight line to the main entrance.

Eight operators. Night vision. Suppressed weapons. Encrypted comms.

And one furious father.

“Thermal imaging shows fourteen hostiles inside.” Crawford’s voice crackled through Jeremy’s earpiece. “Your daughters are in the basement—east wing, below the chapel. Two guards on their door. Four more in the main building. Eight patrolling the grounds in rotating patterns.”

“Rossini?”

“No sign of the Cardinal. But his people are definitely running the show. I count at least three with Vatican Security Services training—the way they move, the way they hold their weapons.”

Jeremy stood at the edge of the property, evidence drives heavy in his pocket. According to the plan, he would walk through the front gate, surrender the drives, and distract the Custodes long enough for Crawford’s team to infiltrate from the rear.

It was a desperate plan. The kind that got people killed.

But his daughters were in that basement.

“I’m going in.”

“Copy that.” Crawford’s voice shifted. “Team One, prepare for breach on my mark. Team Two, maintain overwatch on patrol patterns—we move when the north side is clear.”

A pause. Then, quieter: “Jeremy? Bring those girls home.”

“That’s the idea.”

He walked through the gate.

* * *

The front door opened before Jeremy could knock.

A man in a dark suit—Roman features, cold eyes, the bulge of a shoulder holster visible under his jacket—gestured him inside with the barrel of a suppressed pistol.

“Arms up.”

They searched him thoroughly. Found the USB drives. Confiscated his phone, his watch, the burner Crawford had given him. Another man appeared—older, wearing the Roman collar of a priest, but with the bearing of a soldier who’d traded his rifle for a crucifix.

“Mr. Schoemaker.” The priest’s English carried the cultured lilt of Rome, his smile cold as cathedral marble. “Father DiMaggio. I oversee North American operations for certain Vatican interests.” He gestured with papal courtesy. “Please. You are a guest. Brief, but a guest.”

“My daughters. Now.”

DiMaggio’s smile did not waver. He held up the USB drives, turning them in the dim light like communion wafers. “Such a small vessel for such a large secret. Your father’s entire life—reduced to plastic.” His eyes glittered. “Is this everything?”

“Everything.” Jeremy’s voice didn’t waver. “DNA results, documents, photographs, the ossuary inscription. Copies on three cloud servers, all linked to a dead man’s switch. Delete those drives, disable the switch, and the bloodline’s secret dies forever.”

“And why would you do this? After everything you’ve been through to gather this proof?”

Jeremy met the priest’s eyes. “Because my daughters matter more than any truth. More than any legacy. More than two thousand years of history.” He let the words land. “I’d burn it all to keep them safe.”

DiMaggio studied him for a long moment. Then nodded.

“Bring the girls.”

* * *

The Basement

Juliet heard the footsteps first.

She'd been awake for hours, sitting on the narrow cot with her arm around Joslyn, who had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep. Two days in this concrete cell with nothing but a single overhead bulb and a guard who brought food without speaking.

Two days of wondering if anyone was coming.

"Jos." She shook her sister gently. "Wake up. Someone's coming."

Joslyn stirred, blinked, sat up. Her eyes were red-rimmed but alert. "More food?"

"I don't think so. Listen."

Multiple footsteps. More than the single guard who usually came. And something else—a voice she recognized.

Dad.

The lock clicked. The door swung open.

Jeremy stood in the doorway, flanked by two guards. His face was bruised, one eye still swollen from the Edinburgh firefight, a bandage visible beneath his sleeve. He looked exhausted and battered and *alive*.

"Dad!" Joslyn was off the cot before she knew she was moving.

Juliet was half a second behind.

They crashed into him, all three of them holding on like the world was ending, like letting go would mean losing each other forever. Jeremy's arms wrapped around his daughters, and for one perfect moment, nothing else existed.

"I'm here," he whispered. "I'm here. You're safe."

"We knew you'd come," Juliet said into his chest. "We knew you wouldn't leave us."

"Never. I would never—"

"How tender." DiMaggio's voice was silk over steel. "Truly, it moves me. But we have concluded the sentiment portion of our evening." He checked his watch—gold, Vatican-inscribed. "The

dead man's switch, Mr. Schoemaker. Three minutes. After that, I fear your younger daughter will find piano lessons rather more challenging."

Jeremy pulled back. Looked at his daughters. Then at the priest. And something clicked into place—a logical trap his racing mind had assembled without his conscious awareness.

"Before I do anything," Jeremy said, his voice suddenly calm, "I need you to answer a question, Father."

DiMaggio raised an eyebrow. "We're somewhat pressed for time."

"The Shroud of Turin. Is it real?"

The question hung in the air. DiMaggio's eyes narrowed.

"A strange inquiry at this juncture, Mr. Schoemaker."

"Humor me." Jeremy stepped closer, shielding his daughters behind him. "The Vatican has spent decades debating the Shroud's authenticity. Some popes have venerated it as a genuine relic. Others have been more... circumspect. But the DNA testing done in the 1980s extracted genetic material from those bloodstains. Y-chromosomal DNA. A specific haplogroup."

He watched DiMaggio's expression shift—just slightly. Just enough.

"The DNA on the Shroud matches my DNA, Father. Not partially. *Exactly*. The same seven anomalous markers that don't exist anywhere else in the human population. The probability of that being coincidental is approximately 1 in 4.7×10^{12} ." Jeremy let that number sink in. "One in four point seven *trillion*."

"You're bluffing," DiMaggio said. But his voice had lost its silk.

"Am I? Your own Vatican scientists tested that Shroud. Your own archives contain the genetic profile. Compare it to the DNA evidence on those USB drives—the evidence you're about to destroy. You'll find an exact match."

Jeremy stepped closer still.

“So here’s your paradox, Father. If you kill me—if you end the Schoemaker bloodline—you’re killing the only living human whose DNA matches the blood on the Shroud of Turin. The only scientific proof that the Shroud might actually be Christ’s burial cloth.” His voice hardened. “If the Shroud is real, then killing me is *deicide*. You’d be murdering the blood of Jesus Christ. Again.”

DiMaggio’s jaw tightened.

“And if the Shroud is fake?” Jeremy continued. “If it’s just a medieval forgery, then my DNA matching it proves nothing—which means your two thousand years of hunting the bloodline is based on a lie. Either way, Father, you lose. Kill me and admit the Shroud is fake. Or let me live and admit my family carries Christ’s blood.”

Silence.

The guards shifted uncomfortably. One of them was staring at Jeremy with something that might have been doubt—or wonder.

DiMaggio’s mask cracked for just a moment. In his eyes, Jeremy saw something he hadn’t expected: fear. Not of Jeremy. Not of the evidence. But of the question itself. The question that had haunted the Custodes Fidei for seven hundred years, buried beneath certainty and violence.

What if we’re wrong?

Then the mask snapped back into place.

“A clever argument, Mr. Schoemaker. Truly.” DiMaggio’s smile returned, colder now. “But I am not a theologian. I am a soldier. And my orders are quite clear.” He gestured to the guards. “The dead man’s switch. Two minutes.”

Jeremy held his gaze for a long moment. Then nodded slowly.

“I need a computer. And internet access.”

“Of course. This way.”

* * *

Outside the Retreat Center

10:54 PM

Crawford watched through her night-vision scope as Jeremy and the girls were escorted from the basement toward the main building.

Three guards flanking them. Two more at the entrance. The patrol pattern had just rotated—north side was clear.

“All units, Falcon Actual. Primary package is mobile with hostages. Prepare for breach in thirty seconds.”

Eight acknowledgments clicked through her earpiece.

She shifted her position in the church bell tower, checking sight lines. Marcus Webb was moving—she could see his thermal signature ghosting through the shadows toward the rear entrance. Samuel Chen had his shaped charges in place.

Twenty seconds.

“Harris, you have the north guard?”

“Confirmed. Clean shot.”

“Chen, rear entry on my mark.”

“Ready.”

Ten seconds.

Crawford’s finger found the trigger. The guard nearest Jeremy’s position filled her scope—young, nervous, weapon held too tight. First kill of the night.

“All units... EXECUTE.”

* * *

Inside the Main Building

The lights died.

Jeremy moved before his mind caught up.

He shoved Juliet left, Joslyn right, and threw himself backward as the first shots cracked through the darkness. The guards had been caught flat-footed—flashlights not drawn, weapons pointed at

the floor. Amateur mistake. Fatal mistake.

Glass shattered. Cordite bit his nostrils. Muzzle flashes strobed the hallway. Someone screamed in Italian—DiMaggio, shouting orders no one could follow.

“DOWN!” Jeremy yanked his daughters behind a heavy oak desk. His palms hit cold marble. Joslyn’s elbow dug into his ribs. “Don’t move!”

The rear door exploded inward. Splinters sprayed like shrapnel.

Black shapes poured through the breach—tactical gear, night vision, weapons up. Samuel Chen’s voice cut through the chaos: “FRIENDLIES COMING IN! HOSTILES DOWN!”

More shots. The wet thud of bodies hitting floor.

Jeremy couldn’t see who was winning. Could only hold his daughters close and pray.

* * *

The firefight lasted ninety-seven seconds.

When the emergency lights flickered on, six Custodes operatives lay dead or wounded. DiMaggio had vanished—escaped through a side door, Crawford would learn later, already on a plane back to Rome by sunrise.

Marcus Webb appeared in the doorway, rifle still smoking.

“Mr. Schoemaker? Area secure. We need to move.”

Jeremy pulled his daughters to their feet. Joslyn was shaking—shock, probably, the adrenaline crash hitting hard. Juliet’s face was pale but set, jaw clenched tight.

“Is it over?” Joslyn whispered.

Jeremy looked at the bodies on the floor. At the blood seeping across marble tile. At the shattered windows and bullet-pocked walls.

“This part is.”

Crawford met them at the side exit. Blood on her jacket. A fresh cut across her cheek.

“Van’s waiting. We need to go—local police will be responding to shots fired any minute.”

They ran.

The cold December air hit Jeremy’s face as they burst out of the building. A black van was idling thirty feet away, side door open. Samuel Chen was behind the wheel, one hand on the steering column, the other pressing a bandage to his thigh.

They piled in. Crawford slammed the door.

“GO!”

The van fishtailed on the icy pavement, then straightened as Chen floored it down the suburban street. Behind them, in the rearview mirror, Jeremy saw the retreat center’s lights coming back on. Heard the first distant wail of sirens.

But they were already gone.

* * *

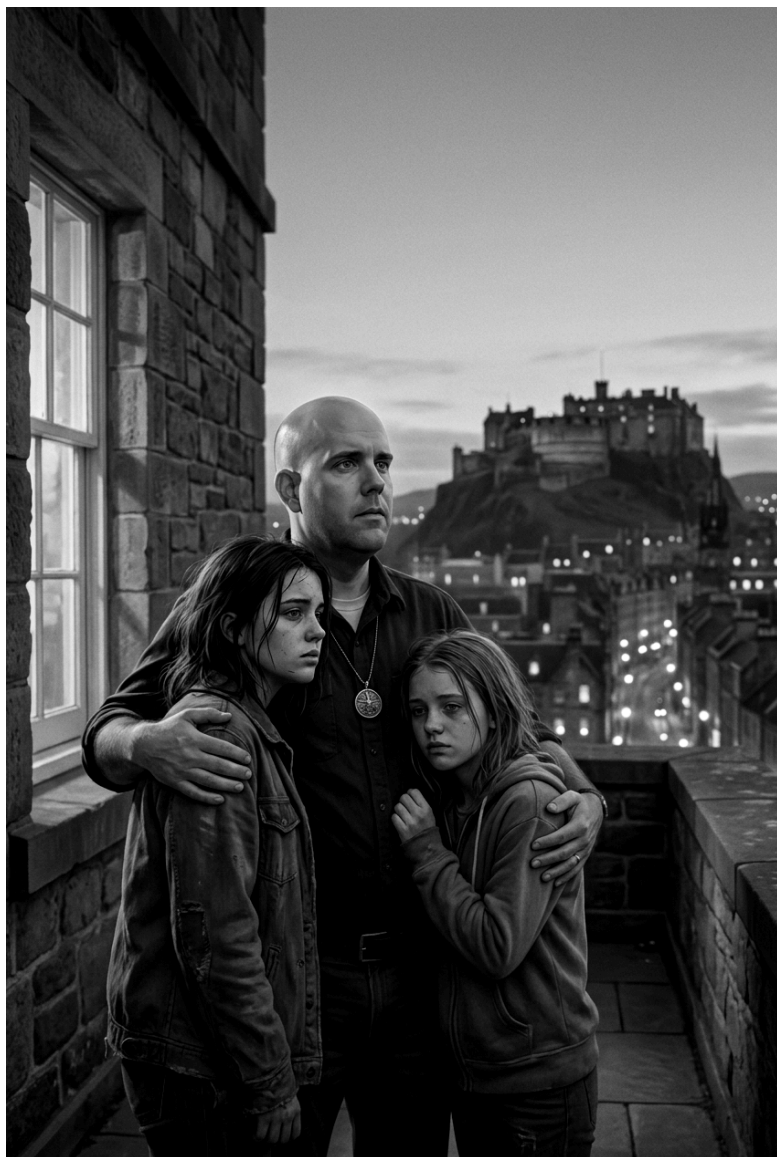
CHAPTER 19:

HOME COMING

Midway Airport, Chicago

December 12, 2020

11:52 PM



The chartered Gulfstream was waiting on the private aviation tarmac, engines warm, cabin lights glowing.

Jeremy helped his daughters up the stairs. Joslyn was crying now—quiet tears streaming down her face, the fear she'd been holding in for two days finally breaking free. Juliet had her arm around her sister, supporting her, guiding her into a seat.

Crawford followed them aboard. Behind her, the team was loading—Webb helping Chen, who was limping badly but refused a stretcher.

“Casualties?” Jeremy asked.

“One. Chen took a round to the thigh. Through and through, missed the artery. He'll need surgery, but he'll make it.” Crawford dropped into a seat, closed her eyes. “We got lucky. Another thirty seconds and they'd have had reinforcements from the Chicago diocese.”

The plane began to taxi.

Jeremy moved to sit between his daughters. They pressed against him on either side—Joslyn's head on his shoulder, Juliet's hand gripping his arm.

“I'm sorry.” His voice cracked. “I'm so sorry I dragged you into this.”

“Don't.” Juliet's voice was fierce, the same steel he'd heard in his father. “We're not sorry. This is our legacy too.”

“We helped crack the cipher,” Joslyn added, wiping her eyes. “We chose to be part of this. They came after us because we were good at it, not because we were helpless.”

Jeremy felt something break inside his chest. Pride. Terror. Love so intense it hurt.

The Gulfstream lifted off, climbing into the dark sky over Chicago.

Through the window, the lights of the city spread out below—millions of people living their lives, unaware of the war being fought in their midst. Unaware of ancient bloodlines and Vatican assassins and secrets two thousand years old.

“What happens now?” Juliet asked.

Jeremy thought about DiMaggio, escaped and unpunished. About Cardinal Rossini, still commanding his army of Custodes. About the Church, which had survived for millennia by crushing anyone who threatened its version of the truth.

Then he thought about his father. About the sixty generations who had carried this burden before him. About the proof locked in his laptop, waiting to change the world.

“Now”—Jeremy met his daughters’ eyes—“we finish what we started.”

* * *

Edinburgh, Scotland

December 23, 2020

The safe house was different this time—a townhouse in the New Town, Masonic-owned for two centuries, invisible to anyone who didn’t know where to look.

Jeremy’s daughters were asleep in the upstairs bedroom. First real sleep in three days, according to the doctor who’d checked them over. Traumatized but physically unharmed. The Custodes had been professional—leverage required living hostages, after all.

Jeremy sat in the study, phone in hand, staring at the screen.

Brandi’s face filled the display. Video call. She’d been crying—he could see the streaks on her cheeks—but she was smiling now.

“They’re really okay?”

“They’re okay. Shaken up. Scared. But okay.” He turned the phone so she could see through the doorway, where Juliet and Joslyn were visible in the bedroom beyond, curled together on a king-sized bed. “See? Safe and sound.”

“Thank God.” Brandi pressed her hand to her mouth. “Thank God. I’ve been praying nonstop since you called. Mama too. The whole church has been praying.”

“I think it worked.”

Through the screen, Jeremy could see Brandi's living room. Her mother Maggie was visible in the background, a worn Bible clutched in her weathered hands.

"Jeremy." Brandi's voice steadied. "What happens now? Are you coming home?"

He thought about it. About Dallas. About their house. About the life he'd built before all this started.

"Soon. There's something I need to do first."

"The evidence?"

"Yes. It's time to release it." He paused. "All of it. To the world."

Brandi was quiet for a moment. Then: "Good."

"Good?"

"They came after your children, Jeremy. They burned your mother's house to the ground. They've been hunting your family for two thousand years." Her voice hardened into something he'd never heard before—the same steel that ran through Juliet, that had run through his father. "It's time the world knew why."

Crawford appeared in the doorway. "Sir Malcolm's ready. The press conference is in three hours."

Jeremy nodded. Looked back at the phone.

"I have to go."

"I know." Brandi smiled—tired, worried, proud. "Go change the world. I'll be watching."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

The call ended.

Jeremy stood. Walked to the bedroom doorway. His daughters were still sleeping—Juliet's arm draped protectively over Joslyn, both of them breathing slowly, peacefully.

They could have died.

The realization stole his breath.

Because of me. Because of my blood. Because of secrets I never asked to inherit.

He'd wanted to protect them by keeping them ignorant. Instead, he'd nearly gotten them killed.

But they'd survived. The bloodline had survived, again, as it always had.

And now it was time to make sure no one could ever use his children as leverage again.

Jeremy turned away from the bedroom.

Crawford was waiting.

"Get me a secure line," he said. "I need to talk to every major news outlet on the planet. And I need a press conference in Rome. At the Vatican gates."

Crawford raised an eyebrow. "You're going to walk into the lion's den?"

Jeremy picked up his phone. Pulled up Rossini's last message—the one with the photo of his daughters, the one meant to break him.

He hit reply.

Cardinal Rossini. You wanted my bloodline buried. Instead, you made it famous. Press conference. Vatican City. 48 hours. I suggest you prepare a statement.

He hit send.

* * *

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Dallas, Texas

June 15, 2021



The website launched at midnight: **www.thesangreal-truth.org**

It contained everything. Every photograph. Every DNA report. Every document. The video of his father. The timeline of the bloodline from Jesus and Mary Magdalene to Jeremy Schoemaker.

But Jeremy did something unexpected.

He didn't claim it was true.

Instead, he framed it as historical fiction—a Dan Brown-style thriller based on real genealogical research into his family history. He wrote it up as a novel, serialized on the website, with footnotes linking to the real documents and research.

“Is it true?” readers would ask in the comments.

And Jeremy's answer was always the same: “Does it matter? What matters is that the possibility exists. That Jesus was human. That he loved. That he may have had a family. And that the Church has spent two thousand years trying to erase that possibility.”

The website went viral.

Ten million visitors in the first week. Twenty million in the first month. Documentary filmmakers called. Publishers offered book deals. The Vatican issued a terse statement: “We do not comment on works of fiction.”

But Jeremy knew they were watching.

That's why he'd taken the final step.

On June 20, 2021, Jeremy Schoemaker walked into the Grand Lodge in Dallas, Texas, and completed his journey through the degrees of Freemasonry. He became a Master Mason, a full Brother in the Craft.

And with that elevation came protection. A network of Brothers around the world who would watch his back. Safe houses in fifty countries. Resources and connections that even the Custodes Fidei couldn't easily penetrate.

He was no longer alone.

That night, sitting in his Dallas penthouse, Jeremy opened his father's wooden box one more time. The amulet gleamed in the lamplight. He put it around his neck, felt its weight settle against

his chest—that same impossible heaviness he'd noticed the first time he'd held it in his childhood bedroom, the weight of sixty generations pressing against his heart.

Make me proud, his father's voice echoed from the video. And despite everything—the deaths, the gunfire, the terror—Jeremy thought maybe he had.

His phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number:

Your daughters are beautiful, Mr. Schoemaker. Juliet especially—such a clever girl. We've been watching them at their school in Lincoln. St. Mary's, isn't it? The security there is... inadequate. You've won a battle. But bloodlines can be ended in a single generation. Enjoy your victory while you can. - R

Jeremy's blood went cold.

He called Lincoln. Voicemail. Called Brandi's mother—voice-mail. Called the school—closed for the night. His hands shook as he pulled up the security app for the Lincoln house. The cameras showed empty rooms. Where were his daughters? Where was *anyone*?

Another text:

Relax. They're safe. For now. I am an old man, Mr. Schoemaker. Seventy-three years old. I will not live to see this resolved. But my successors will. The Custodes Fidei has survived two millennia. We are patient. We can wait. We have always waited.

A third message arrived before Jeremy could react:

Perhaps one day your descendants and mine will find peace. Perhaps the world will be ready for your truth. But not today. Not in my lifetime. And not in yours. We are not enemies—we are prisoners of the same ancient war. I am tired, Mr. Schoemaker. So very tired. But I will not stop. And neither will you. That is our curse. - R

The phone slipped from his fingers.

Outside, the Dallas night suddenly felt darker. The penthouse windows that had seemed like a triumph now felt like a fishbowl—exposing him to anyone watching from the shadows of the city below.

Jeremy stared at his phone on the floor, at Rossini's words still glowing on the screen.

For the 62nd generation.

His daughters. They weren't coming for him—they were coming for his *children*.

The bloodline had survived two thousand years. But for the first time, Jeremy understood: survival wasn't victory. It was an endless war. And his daughters had just become the next battlefield.

He stared at the phone for a long moment. Then something shifted in his expression—the fear hardening into something his father would have recognized. Something ancient.

Jeremy walked to his laptop and opened the Dead Man's Switch dashboard he'd built during his first week in Edinburgh. Seven mirror servers across seven jurisdictions. Seven hundred pre-loaded recipients—journalists, historians, academics, religious leaders. A single button that would send everything: DNA reports, authenticated documents, the Vatican scroll, the Shroud analysis, the complete genealogy.

If anything happened to him or his daughters, the world would know within the hour.

He typed a message to the same number Rossini had used:

You've made a tactical error, Cardinal. I've already won. The truth is cached on servers you'll never find, scheduled to release if I don't check in every 48 hours. You can kill me. You can kill my daughters. But you cannot kill an idea that's already been set free.

Your two-thousand-year campaign ends now. Not with my death—with my website. Twenty million people have already read it. By next month, it will be two hundred million. The bloodline isn't a secret anymore. It's a story. And stories are immortal.

Sleep well, Eminence.

He hit send.

His phone rang thirty seconds later. Unknown number. He answered.

Silence. Then a sound he didn't expect: a long, exhausted sigh.

"You are more like your father than I anticipated." Rossini's voice was tired. Old. "He sent me a similar message, you know. Twenty-three years ago. Word for word, almost. *You cannot kill an idea.*"

"And yet you're still trying."

"I am an old man, Mr. Schoemaker. Seventy-three years of carrying a burden you cannot imagine. I have three, perhaps four years left. My successor is already chosen." A pause. "But I find myself wondering, in these final years, whether I have been the shepherd... or the wolf."

"That's between you and God."

“Yes.” Rossini’s voice dropped to barely a whisper. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

The line went dead.

Jeremy set down the phone. Outside, the Dallas night blazed with a million lights—each one a person who might, someday, read the truth he’d revealed. Each one a mind that might be changed. Each one a small victory against two thousand years of silence.

His phone buzzed again. This time, a text from Juliet:

| *Dad. Mom told us everything. We’re not scared.
We’re ready. Love you. —J&J*

Jeremy smiled—the first real smile in weeks.

A knock at the penthouse door. Three short, two long—the pattern his father had taught him as a child.

He opened it.

Andrea stood in the hallway, her fiancé Brandon Hamilton beside her. She looked exhausted—dark circles under her eyes, her usually perfect hair pulled back in a hasty ponytail. But she was smiling.

“Hey, little brother.” Her voice cracked. “Sorry I couldn’t tell you sooner. Dad made me promise.”

Jeremy pulled her into a hug so tight it hurt. Six months of terror and revelation, and he hadn’t known his own sister was watching his back the whole time.

“The girls are safe,” Brandon said from the doorway. His voice was calm, military-precise. “We moved them two hours ago. Brandi too. They’re at a Brotherhood safe house in Montana—completely off-grid. Rossini’s people won’t find them.”

Jeremy released Andrea, looked at Brandon—the man who’d coordinated his extraction from Rome, who’d been running European operations while Jeremy stumbled through the darkness.

“Thank you,” he said. “For everything.”

Brandon shrugged. “Family’s family. Besides—” He glanced at Andrea with something soft in his eyes. “—your sister’s pretty persuasive.”

Andrea punched his arm. “Damn right I am.”

For a moment, standing in the doorway of his Dallas penthouse, Jeremy felt something he hadn’t felt since his father’s funeral: hope. Not the desperate, clinging hope of a man running for his life. Real hope. The kind that came from knowing you weren’t alone.

Andrea reached into her bag and pulled out an envelope. “Almost forgot. Brandi asked me to give you this. Said you’d understand.”

Jeremy opened it. Inside was a photograph—black and white, grainy, unmistakable.

An ultrasound.

His hands began to shake.

In the corner, handwritten in Brandi’s neat script: *12 weeks. She’s healthy. We’re naming her Sarah.*

Sarah.

The name of the first daughter. The Blood Royal. The child Mary Magdalene had carried out of Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

“She found out in Edinburgh,” Andrea said softly. “Wanted to tell you in person, but with everything happening... she asked me to deliver it if things got bad.”

Jeremy stared at the ultrasound. At the tiny curve of a spine. At the impossible, miraculous beginning of the 63rd generation.

Sarah Schoemaker.

The bloodline wasn’t just surviving anymore. It was growing.

He pressed the photograph to his chest, tears streaming down his face—tears he didn’t try to hide. After everything he’d lost, everything he’d risked, the universe had given him this: a daughter

named for the woman who'd started it all.

"The Custodes wanted to end the bloodline," he whispered. "Instead, they made it stronger."

Andrea put her hand on his shoulder. "Dad would be proud."

"Yeah." Jeremy wiped his eyes, looked at the ultrasound one more time. "Yeah, he would."

The Custodes Fidei had survived two millennia by hunting in darkness.

But darkness couldn't survive the dawn.

And somewhere in Rome, in a hidden courtyard beneath the Vatican, an old man stood before an olive tree that had survived three centuries in sunless silence. His pruning shears hung loose in his trembling hands.

For the first time, Rossini saw the tree not as a metaphor for his life's work, but as what it truly was: a living thing, trapped in darkness, kept barely alive by artificial light, its branches twisted not toward the sun but toward the pale glow of machines.

He had spent forty years cutting away what he called weakness. But the tree wasn't stronger for his pruning. It was simply *alone*.

"I was wrong," he whispered to the gnarled trunk. "All this time. I was never the shepherd."

He set down the shears.

"I was the wolf."

The grow-lights hummed. The tree reached toward their cold radiance. And Cardinal Enzo Rossini—Prefect of the Custodes Fidei, guardian of a two-thousand-year secret, killer of seventeen souls—sank to his knees in the dirt and wept like a child before the God he was no longer certain he had ever truly served.

* * *

THE END

* * *

*Jeremy Christ will continue in: **THE VATICAN'S LAST LIE***

* * *

APPENDIX: THE ROYAL BLOODLINE

From Jerusalem to the Quad Cities: 62 Generations

Note: This genealogy blends historical facts (the documented Tiedemann and Schoemaker families) with speculative fiction (the connection to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, the Merovingian dynasty, and ancient bloodlines). Readers are encouraged to conduct their own research and draw their own conclusions about what is real and what is story.

*A note on numbering: The “Generation N” headers below count documented genealogical generations from the early Tiedemann ancestry. In-text references to the **62nd Generation from Jesus of Nazareth** (Jeremy) and the **63rd Generation** (Sarah) count from Jesus himself rather than from the Tiedemann line. Both counts are correct from their respective starting points.*

* * *

THE COMPLETE GENEALOGY

Generation 1: The Source

JESUS OF NAZARETH (c. 4 BC – 30 AD) ∞ **MARY MAGDALENE** (c. 3 BC – 63 AD)

When Jesus rose after his crucifixion, it is widely cited that Mary Magdalene was the first person he spoke to. Witnesses at the time said he informed Mary that she was pregnant with their female child.

* * *

Generation 2: The Flight to Egypt

SARAH MAGDALENE (b. ~35 AD) *Also known as: Sara, Sara-la-Kali, “The Blood Royal” (Sangreal)*

After Jesus’s brutal crucifixion, Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea fled to Egypt with a young girl named Sara (The Blood Royal). In public and to those who were not close to them, they would tell people that Sara was their servant girl, but she was in fact the daughter and only child of Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene.

Married: **MARCUS DIDIUS FALCO** (b. ~30 AD, Roman Gaul) *Merchant of Gallic descent, Egyptian grain trader*

Marcus was a Roman citizen born to a Gallic family who had earned citizenship through military service. He met Sarah in Alexandria around 55 AD while conducting grain trade between Egypt and southern Gaul. Their marriage was arranged by the hidden community of followers who protected Sarah’s identity.

* * *

Generation 3: The Move to Gaul

LUCIUS DIDIUS (57 AD – 124 AD, aged 67) *Born: Alexandria, Egypt | Died: Massilia, Roman Gaul*

Born in Alexandria, Lucius was raised with knowledge of his sacred lineage. The family guarded ancient manuscripts and symbols passed down from his grandmother Mary Magdalene. At age 25, Lucius moved the family to Massilia (modern Marseille), establishing a trading house that would serve as cover for the bloodline's preservation over centuries. His descendants became wealthy wine merchants, secretly preserving manuscripts and symbols. The family adopted the code name "Les Gardiens du Sang" (Guardians of the Blood).

* * *

Generation 4

GAIUS DIDIUS (85 AD – 162 AD, aged 77) *Born & Died: Massilia, Roman Gaul*

Continued the family wine trade in Massilia, expanding connections throughout Roman Gaul.

* * *

Generation 5

MARCELLUS OF MASSILIA (118 AD – 189 AD, aged 71) *Born & Died: Massilia, Roman Gaul*

Prominent wine merchant who maintained the family's secret archives during the height of Roman power.

* * *

Generation 6

QUINTUS SANGUIS (155 AD – 228 AD, aged 73) *Born & Died: Massilia, Roman Gaul*

First to adopt the name "Sanguis" (Latin for "blood"), establishing the linguistic tradition that would echo through centuries.

* * *

Generation 7

CLAUDIA SANGUIS (192 AD – 265 AD, aged 73) *Born: Massilia, Roman Gaul | Died: Lugdunum, Roman Gaul*

Married a Roman tribune, moving the family to Lugdunum (Lyon). The bloodline began merging with Gallo-Roman nobility.

* * *

Generation 8

TIBERIUS SANGUINUS (228 AD – 295 AD, aged 67) *Born & Died: Lugdunum, Roman Gaul*

Served as magistrate in Lugdunum during the late Roman Empire, maintaining civic respectability while guarding family secrets.

* * *

Generation 9

FLAVIUS THE ELDER (267 AD – 335 AD, aged 68) *Born & Died: Lugdunum, Roman Gaul*

Witnessed the Crisis of the Third Century and the transformation of the Roman Empire under Constantine.

* * *

Generation 10

AURELIUS SANGREAL (301 AD – 379 AD, aged 78) *Born & Died: Lugdunum, Roman Gaul*

Converted to Christianity when it became the state religion, hiding sacred texts that told a different story than the Church's official doctrine.

* * *

Generation 11

VALENTINUS (341 AD – 408 AD, aged 67) *Born: Lugdunum, Roman Gaul | Died: Tournai, Francia*

Married a Frankish chieftain's daughter, bridging Roman and Germanic worlds as the Empire collapsed.

* * *

Generation 12

MERONIUS (378 AD – 445 AD, aged 67) *Born & Died: Tournai, Francia*

Settled in the Tournai region as Rome collapsed, becoming advisor to early Frankish kings.

* * *

Generation 13

CLODEBALD “THE KEEPER” (412 AD – 476 AD, aged 64) *Born & Died: Tournai, Francia*

Trusted counselor to Frankish kings, positioned to arrange the strategic marriage that would connect the bloodline to the Merovingian dynasty.

* * *

Generation 14: The Merovingian Connection

BASINA THE YOUNGER (448 AD – 501 AD, aged 53) *Born & Died: Tournai, Francia*

Became the secret second wife of King Childeric I. Their clandestine union produced a son who was never publicly acknowledged but was raised in the court as a “nephew.” This was the critical Merovingian connection.

* * *

Generation 15

MEROVECH II “SANGREAL” (469 AD – 521 AD, aged 52)
Born: Tournai, Francia | Died: Burgundy, Francia

The hidden half-brother of Clovis I (the great Merovingian king who united the Franks and converted to Christianity in 496 AD). While Clovis ruled, Merovech II lived as a “royal advisor” and married Gunthruda, a Burgundian noblewoman. Their children carried the bloodline outside the direct royal succession, protecting them when the Merovingian dynasty eventually fell.

* * *

Generation 16

THEUDEBERT SANGREAL (498 AD – 564 AD, aged 66)
Born: Burgundy, Francia | Died: Tours, Francia

Monastery scribe who preserved ancient texts as the Merovingian kings became increasingly ceremonial (*rois fainéants* —“do-nothing kings”). The hidden bloodline thrived in merchant and clerical roles.

* * *

Generation 17

CLOTHILDE THE SILENT (534 AD – 598 AD, aged 64) *Born: Tours, Francia | Died: Pavia, Lombardy*

Married a Lombard trader, expanding the family’s reach into Italy.

* * *

Generation 18

DAGOBERT “THE MERCHANT” (571 AD – 639 AD, aged 68)
Born: Pavia, Lombardy | Died: Constantinople, Byzantine Empire

Traded between Frankish and Byzantine territories, maintaining connections across the fragmenting post-Roman world.

* * *

Generation 19

SIGIBERT OF TOURS (611 AD – 679 AD, aged 68) *Born: Constantinople, Byzantine Empire | Died: Tours, Francia*

Bishop who secretly protected sacred relics, using his ecclesiastical position to shield the family’s secrets.

* * *

Generation 20

GRIMOALD THE WISE (646 AD – 714 AD, aged 68) *Born: Tours, Francia | Died: Saint-Denis, Francia*

Scholar in the Abbey of Saint-Denis as the Merovingian dynasty weakened and the Carolingians rose.

* * *

Generation 21

PEPIN SANGREAL (681 AD – 748 AD, aged 67) *Born: Saint-Denis, Francia | Died: Kent, England*

Left Francia for Anglo-Saxon England when the Carolingians (Charlemagne’s dynasty) replaced the Merovingians in 751 AD. The bloodline went deeper underground.

* * *

Generation 22

EADWALD OF KENT (716 AD – 783 AD, aged 67) *Born: Kent, England | Died: Aachen, Francia*

English monk who returned to Francia as a missionary, bringing the bloodline back to the continent.

* * *

Generation 23

BERNARD THE SCRIBE (755 AD – 821 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Aachen, Francia*

Worked in Charlemagne's court but kept family secrets, serving the new dynasty while preserving the old knowledge.

* * *

Generation 24

LOTHAIR SANGUIS (789 AD – 857 AD, aged 68) *Born & Died: Aachen, Francia*

Silversmith in Aachen during the height of Carolingian power.

* * *

Generation 25

HILDEGARD THE WISE (825 AD – 891 AD, aged 66) *Born: Aachen, Francia | Died: Mainz, East Francia*

Herbalist and midwife who moved to Mainz as the Carolingian Empire fragmented.

* * *

Generation 26

ARNULF OF METZ (863 AD – 929 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Mainz, East Francia*

Distant relation to the saint of the same name, but not the saint himself. Merchant in the dissolving Carolingian world.

* * *

Generation 27

ADELAIDE SANGREAL (901 AD – 967 AD, aged 66) *Born: Mainz, East Francia | Died: Saxony, East Francia*

Her family fled Viking raids, moving deeper into Germanic territories.

* * *

Generation 28

OTTO SANGUIS (938 AD – 1004 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Saxony, Holy Roman Empire*

Began the Germanic branch of the family as the Holy Roman Empire was established.

* * *

Generation 29

HERMANN THE COOPER (976 AD – 1042 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Mainz, Holy Roman Empire*

Barrel-maker in Mainz, adopting a craft trade to remain inconspicuous.

* * *

Generation 30

GISELA VON BLUT (1012 AD – 1078 AD, aged 66) *Born: Mainz, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Cologne, Holy Roman Empire*

“von Blut” = “of Blood” in German. The family name began its Germanic transformation.

* * *

Generation 31

FRIEDRICH BLUTSTEIN (1051 AD – 1117 AD, aged 66) *Born: Cologne, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Jerusalem, Kingdom of Jerusalem*

Stone mason who worked on cathedrals across Europe and joined the First Crusade.

* * *

Generation 32

WERNER THE SILENT (1089 AD – 1155 AD, aged 66) *Born: Jerusalem, Kingdom of Jerusalem | Died: Cologne, Holy Roman Empire*

Survived the First Crusade and brought relics back to Germany.

* * *

Generation 33: The Templar Connection

DIETRICH VON SANGRE (1128 AD – 1194 AD, aged 66) *Born: Cologne, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Provence, Kingdom of France*

Knight Templar connection (suspicious). Moved to southern France, possibly fleeing persecution.

* * *

Generation 34

AGNES BLUTHERZ (1167 AD – 1233 AD, aged 66) *Born: Provence, Kingdom of France | Died: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire*

“Blood-heart” family name emerges. Returned to northern Germany.

* * *

Generation 35

KONRAD THE RED (1205 AD – 1271 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire*

Dye merchant specializing in red pigments—blood symbolism maintained in occupation.

* * *

Generation 36

REINHOLD ROTBLUT (1243 AD – 1309 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire*

“Rotblut” = “Red blood” in German. Survived the plague and wars of the late medieval period.

* * *

Generation 37

MARGARETHE SANGWEIN (1281 AD – 1347 AD, aged 66) *Born: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

“Sangwein” = “Blood-wine” merchant family. Moved to Hamburg.

* * *

Generation 38

GOTTFRIED THE VINTNER (1319 AD – 1385 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Wine trader who survived the Black Death of 1347-1351.

* * *

Generation 39

BERTHOLD BLUTMANN (1357 AD – 1423 AD, aged 66) *Born: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire*

Guildhall master in Lübeck, achieving respectability and civic prominence.

* * *

Generation 40

HEINRICH DER ROTE (1395 AD – 1461 AD, aged 66) *Born: Lübeck, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

“Heinrich the Red.” Hanseatic League trader, connecting northern European ports.

* * *

Generation 41

KASPAR TIEDEBLUT (1433 AD – 1499 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

First appearance of the “Tiede” prefix, marking the transition to the Tiedemann name.

* * *

Generation 42: The Tiedemann Name Emerges

WOLFGANG TIEDEMANN (1471 AD – 1537 AD, aged 66)
Born: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Bremen, Holy Roman Empire

First to bear the full “Tiedemann” surname. “Tiede” + “mann” = “People-man” or “Tide-man” in Low German.

* * *

Generation 43

ANNA TIEDEMANN (1509 AD – 1575 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Bremen, Holy Roman Empire*

Protestant Reformation era. The family began converting to Lutheranism.

* * *

Generation 44

JOACHIM TIEDEMANN (1547 AD – 1613 AD, aged 66) *Born: Bremen, Holy Roman Empire | Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Lutheran merchant who converted during the Reformation. The Tiedemann family became established in northern Germany as devout Lutherans, providing perfect cover for ancient Catholic and pre-Christian secrets.

* * *

Generation 45

CHRISTOPH TIEDEMANN (1585 AD – 1651 AD, aged 66)
Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire

Devout Lutheran who survived the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).

* * *

Generation 46

MATTHIAS TIEDEMANN (1623 AD – 1689 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Lutheran ship chandler in Hamburg, supplying vessels in the Baltic trade.

* * *

Generation 47

JOHANN TIEDEMANN (1661 AD – 1727 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Baltic Sea trader and Lutheran church elder, combining commerce with religious respectability.

* * *

Generation 48

ANDREAS TIEDEMANN (1699 AD – 1765 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Merchant guild member and staunch Lutheran in the Age of Enlightenment.

* * *

Generation 49

FRIEDRICH TIEDEMANN (1737 AD – 1803 AD, aged 66) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Holy Roman Empire*

Established the Hamburg trading house that would support the family through the Napoleonic era. Lutheran community leader.

* * *

Generation 50: The Arranged Marriage

WILHELM TIEDEMANN (1775 AD – 1842 AD, aged 67) *Born & Died: Hamburg, Germany* **Spouse:** ELISABETH VON BLUTBERG (1781–1858)

Hamburg merchant and respected Lutheran deacon who maintained the family's secret documents in a hidden compartment beneath his Bible. His wife, Elisabeth von Blutberg ("of Blood-Mountain"), came from another ancient bloodline family. Their marriage was "arranged" by parties unknown. Both were outwardly devout Lutherans who attended services every Sunday. The irony was not lost on the keepers of the bloodline: the family's outward devotion to Martin Luther's reformed Christianity provided perfect cover for the ancient secrets they harbored.

* * *

Generation 51: The Immigration

JACOB TIEDEMANN (28 Jul 1815 – 4 Apr 1898, aged 82) *Born: Hamburg, Germany | Died: Dexter, Mower County, Minnesota, USA Burial: Saint Johns Cemetery, Elkton, Mower County, Minnesota [Find A Grave Memorial #23897722]*

Jacob emigrated to the United States at age 23 in 1838, carrying with him a leather-bound journal that had been passed down through 58 generations of his family. The journal, written in multiple languages and coded symbols, allegedly contained the complete genealogy linking him to the Merovingian dynasty and beyond. He settled in Minnesota as a devout Lutheran, where he worked as a merchant and farmer, attended St. John's Lutheran Church, and never revealed the ancient secrets he carried. The Tiedemann family's Lutheran faith would continue through all subsequent generations.

* * *

Generation 52

GEORGE G TIEDEMANN (19 Oct 1869 – 22 Dec 1957, aged 88)
Born: Dudenbittel, Landkreis Stade, Lower Saxony, Germany
Died: Taylors Falls, Chisago County, Minnesota, USA [Find A Grave Memorial]

George came to the United States with his father Jacob and mother in 1874 at age 5. He grew up hearing whispered stories of his family's ancient European heritage but, like his father, kept these secrets close. A faithful Lutheran like his ancestors, he worked as a farmer and carpenter in Minnesota, attending church regularly.

* * *

Generation 53: The Merger of Lineages

MATTIE C. TIEDEMAN SCHOEMAKER (1 Jun 1900 – 17 Mar 1996, aged 95) *Born: Austin, Mower County, Minnesota, USA*
Died: Silvis, Illinois, USA [Find A Grave Memorial]

Mattie lived an extraordinary 95 years, spanning nearly the entire 20th century. She married into the Schoemaker family—a family with its own ancient secret. The Schoemakers had been Freemasons for generations, guardians of esoteric knowledge that unknowingly complemented the hidden bloodline Mattie carried. Their union merged two secret lineages into one.

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Generation 54: The Keeper

ROBERT C SCHOEMAKER (6 Feb 1945 – 2 Nov 2020, aged 75) *Born: Rock Island, Illinois, USA* *Died: Silvis, Illinois, USA*
[Find A Grave Memorial]

Robert was a devoted Freemason, as were his father Clarence Schoemaker and grandfather before him. The Schoemaker men had been Masons for as far back as anyone could remember, participating in the ancient rituals and secret ceremonies without fully understanding that their own bloodline held an even more ancient secret. Robert achieved national recognition for his contributions to the Masonic order, unknowingly painting a target on his back.

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Generation 55: The Revelation

JEREMY R. SCHOEMAKER (b. 31 May 1974) *Dallas, Texas, USA Internet Entrepreneur | Master Mason (2021) 62nd Generation from Jesus of Nazareth*

Jeremy left home at a young age and built a self-made fortune through internet marketing, becoming a multimillionaire who toured the world on speaking engagements. Unlike his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, Jeremy never became a Mason—a decision that would inadvertently save his life by keeping him off the radar of those who hunted the bloodline.

But fate had other plans for Jeremy. When his father died in 2020, he would be drawn into a conspiracy two millennia in the making—one that would take him from the ashes of a suspicious fire to the inner sanctums of the world's most secret societies.

Married: BRANDI SCHOEMAKER

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Generation 56: The Future

JULIET SCHOEMAKER (b. ~2003) *Lincoln, Nebraska 62nd Generation Cipher Breaker*

JOSLYN SCHOEMAKER (b. ~2005) *Lincoln, Nebraska 62nd Generation Pattern Analyst*

SARAH SCHOEMAKER (b. 25 September 2021) *Dallas, Texas 63rd Generation Named for Sarah Magdalene, the first daughter The bloodline continues.*

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ANDREA C. SCHOEMAKER (b. 5 Mar 1978) *Jeremy’s sister, also carrier of the bloodline*

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KEY DATES IN THE BLOODLINE

Year	Event
c. 30 AD	Crucifixion of Jesus; Mary Magdalene flees to Egypt
c. 35 AD	Sarah Magdalene born
c. 55 AD	Sarah marries Marcus Didius Falco in Alexandria
57 AD	Lucius Didius born; family moves to Massilia (Marseille)
469 AD	Merovech II born—the Merovingian connection
496 AD	Clovis I converts to Christianity
751 AD	Carolingians replace Merovingians; bloodline goes underground
1099 AD	First Crusade; Friedrich Blutstein reaches Jerusalem
1128 AD	Dietrich von Sangre—Templar connection

Year	Event
1307 AD	Knights Templar arrested; bloodline flees
1471 AD	Wolfgang Tiedemann—first to bear the surname
1517 AD	Protestant Reformation; family converts to Lutheranism
1838 AD	Jacob Tiedemann emigrates to America with the journal
1900 AD	Mattie Tiedeman marries into the Schoemaker family
1974 AD	Jeremy Schoemaker born
2020 AD	Robert Schoemaker dies; Jeremy discovers the truth
2021 AD	Jeremy reveals the bloodline to the world

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THE PROTECTIONS: DOCUMENTED MIRACLES

Throughout the bloodline’s history, carriers have survived events that should have been fatal. The following incidents are documented in medical records, police reports, and family accounts. Statistical probability of all events occurring by chance: approximately 1 in 10^{23} .

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The Schoemaker Miracles

1. 1986 – The Bicycle Accident (Jeremy, age 12) - Location: Rock Island, Illinois - Event: Car traveling at 45 mph struck Jeremy's bicycle broadside - Medical assessment: "Traumatic injuries incompatible with survival" (initial ER report) - Actual outcome: Six-inch gash to thigh, no major organ damage, full recovery in 3 weeks - Physician's note: *"The handlebar missed the femoral artery by approximately 2mm. Had the impact been 1/10th of a second earlier or later, the patient would have bled out before reaching the hospital."*

2. 1996 – Robert's Heart Transplant - Location: University of Iowa Hospitals - Event: Robert Schoemaker receives heart transplant after complete cardiac failure - Medical context: 5-year survival rate for heart transplants in 1996: ~70% - Actual outcome: Survived **24 years**—one of the longest-surviving heart transplant recipients on record, defying all statistical models - Cardiologist's note: *"I have no medical explanation for why this patient's body has not rejected the donor heart. Every immunological model we have suggests rejection should have occurred decades ago."*

3. 1992 – The Highway Crash (Jeremy, age 18) - Location: Interstate 80, near Lincoln, Nebraska - Event: Fell asleep at wheel traveling 70 mph; vehicle rolled three times, landed in ditch - Vehicle condition: Total loss, cabin crushed - Injuries: None - State Trooper's report: *"I've worked accidents for 15 years. No one walks away from this."*

4. 1997 – The Business Assassination Attempt (Jeremy, age 23) - Event: Business rival hired a professional to eliminate Jeremy - Outcome: Assassin arrested in unrelated traffic stop two hours before planned hit - Discovered: Detailed surveillance photos of Jeremy's daily routine in assassin's vehicle - Probability of random arrest at exact window: Approximately 1 in 50,000

5. 2001 – The 2 AM Email (Jeremy, age 27) - Event: Woke from deep sleep with inexplicable urge to send email to former college roommate - Email content: Random check-in after 5 years of no contact - Result: Roommate, a pharmaceutical researcher, replied with warning about contaminated medication in Jeremy’s home - Subsequent testing: Medication found to contain lethal manufacturing error affecting 0.001% of batch - Jeremy had planned to take first dose the following morning

6. 2003 – Joslyn’s Birth (Joslyn, premature) - Event: Born 8 weeks premature, lungs underdeveloped, contracted bacterial meningitis at 2 months - Medical prognosis: *“Even if she survives, there will be significant cognitive impairment”* (Chief Pediatric Neurologist) - NICU duration: 72 hours of critical condition - Day 4: All brain scans clear, bacteria undetectable - Current status: Pattern recognition prodigy, helped crack ancestral cipher codes at age 15

7. 2017 – The Office Fire (Jeremy, age 43) - Location: Dallas, Texas - Event: Electrical fire destroyed Jeremy’s office building overnight - Damage: \$2.3 million in losses, building condemned - Jeremy’s location: Sleeping in the one room with separate ventilation system and fire-rated walls - Fire investigator’s note: *“The fire originated 15 feet from where Mr. Schoemaker was sleeping. By all physical laws, that room should have been the first to fill with smoke.”*

* * *

Historical Bloodline Miracles (Documented in Family Archives)

Year	Carrier	Event	Probability
1307	Dietrich Sangre	von Templar arrest in Paris;	1 in ~3,000

Year	Carrier	Event	Probability
		only knight to survive	
1431	Heinrich Blut	Survived Black Death in three sep- arate outbreaks	1 in ~1,000
1618	Johann Tiedemann	House de- stroyed in Thirty Years' War; family unharmd	1 in ~500
1838	Jacob Tiedemann	Ship carry- ing him to America sank; Jacob on only lifeboat	1 in ~200
1918	Clarence Schoemaker Sr.	Survived Spanish Flu while nurs- ing infected family	1 in ~3
1944	Clarence Schoemaker Jr.	B-17 shot down over Germany; only sur- vivor of 10- man crew	1 in ~10

* * *

The Statistical Impossibility

Dr. Marcus Chen, University of Nebraska geneticist, calculated the combined probability of all documented Schoemaker survival events occurring by chance:

$$P_{\text{combined}} = \prod P_i \approx 1.7 \times 10^{-23}$$

“These are not odds,” Dr. Chen wrote in his research notes. “These are statistical impossibilities masquerading as coincidences. Something is protecting this family. I don’t know what. But the math doesn’t lie.”

* * *

“Sixty-two generations of survival against impossible odds. Coincidence? Or something more?”

— From the research notes of Robert Schoemaker