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IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER



ORIGIN

*We must be willing to get rid of
the life we've planned, so as to
have the life that is waiting for us.*

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL

FACT:

All art, architecture,
locations, science, and
religious organizations in
this novel are real.

PROLOGUE

As the ancient cogwheel train clawed its way up the dizzying incline, Edmond Kirsch surveyed the jagged mountaintop above him. In the distance, built into the face of a sheer cliff, the massive stone monastery seemed to hang in space, as if magically fused to the vertical precipice.

This timeless sanctuary in Catalonia, Spain, had endured the relentless pull of gravity for more than four centuries, never slipping from its original purpose: to insulate its occupants from the modern world.

Ironically, they will now be the first to learn the truth, Kirsch thought, wondering how they would react. Historically, the most dangerous men on earth were men of God . . . especially when their gods became threatened. *And I am about to hurl a flaming spear into a hornets' nest.*

When the train reached the mountaintop, Kirsch saw a solitary figure waiting for him on the platform. The wizened skeleton of a man was draped in the traditional Catholic purple cassock and white rochet, with a zucchetto on his head. Kirsch recognized his host's rawboned features from photos and felt an unexpected surge of adrenaline.

Valdespino is greeting me personally.

Bishop Antonio Valdespino was a formidable figure in Spain—not only a trusted friend and counselor to the king himself, but one of the country's most vocal and influential advocates for the preservation of conservative Catholic values and traditional political standards.

"Edmond Kirsch, I assume?" the bishop intoned as Kirsch exited the train.

"Guilty as charged," Kirsch said, smiling as he reached out to shake his host's bony hand. "Bishop Valdespino, I want to thank you for arranging this meeting."

"I appreciate your *requesting* it." The bishop's voice was stronger than Kirsch expected—clear and penetrating, like a bell. "It is not often we are consulted by men of science, especially one of your prominence. This way, please."

As Valdespino guided Kirsch across the platform, the cold mountain air whipped at the bishop's cassock.

"I must confess," Valdespino said, "you look different than I imagined. I was expecting a scientist, but you're quite . . ." He eyed his guest's sleek Kiton K50 suit and Barker ostrich shoes with a hint of disdain. "'Hip,' I believe, is the word?"

Kirsch smiled politely. *The word "hip" went out of style decades ago.*

"In reading your list of accomplishments," the bishop said, "I am still not entirely sure what it is you do."

"I specialize in game theory and computer modeling."

"So you make the computer games that the children play?"

Kirsch sensed the bishop was feigning ignorance in an attempt to be quaint. More accurately, Kirsch knew, Valdespino was a frighteningly well-informed student of technology and often warned others of its dangers. "No, sir, actually game theory is a field of mathematics that studies patterns in order to make predictions about the future."

"Ah yes. I believe I read that you predicted a European monetary crisis some years ago? When nobody listened, you saved the day by inventing a computer program that pulled the EU back from the dead. What was your famous quote? 'At thirty-three years old, I am the same age as Christ when He performed His resurrection.'"

Kirsch cringed. "A poor analogy, Your Grace. I was young."

"Young?" The bishop chuckled. "And how old are you now . . . perhaps forty?"

"Just."

The old man smiled as the strong wind continued to billow his robe. "Well, the meek were supposed to inherit the earth, but instead it has gone to the young—the technically inclined, those who stare into video screens rather than into their own souls. I must admit, I never imagined I would have reason to meet the young man leading the charge. They call you a *prophet*, you know."

"Not a very good one in your case, Your Grace," Kirsch replied. "When I asked if I might meet you and your colleagues privately, I calculated only a twenty percent chance you would accept."

"And as I told my colleagues, the devout can always benefit from listening to nonbelievers. It is in hearing the voice of the devil that we can better appreciate the voice of God." The old man smiled. "I am joking, of course. Please forgive my aging sense of humor. My filters fail me from time to time."

With that, Bishop Valdespino motioned ahead. “The others are waiting. This way, please.”

Kirsch eyed their destination, a colossal citadel of gray stone perched on the edge of a sheer cliff that plunged thousands of feet down into a lush tapestry of wooded foothills. Unnerved by the height, Kirsch averted his eyes from the chasm and followed the bishop along the uneven cliffside path, turning his thoughts to the meeting ahead.

Kirsch had requested an audience with three prominent religious leaders who had just finished attending a conference here.

The Parliament of the World's Religions.

Since 1893, hundreds of spiritual leaders from nearly thirty world religions had gathered in a different location every few years to spend a week engaged in interfaith dialogue. Participants included a wide array of influential Christian priests, Jewish rabbis, and Islamic mullahs from around the world, along with Hindu *pujaris*, Buddhist *bhikkhus*, Jains, Sikhs, and others.

The parliament's self-proclaimed objective was “to cultivate harmony among the world's religions, build bridges between diverse spiritualities, and celebrate the intersections of all faith.”

A noble quest, Kirsch thought, despite seeing it as an empty exercise—a meaningless search for random points of correspondence among a hodgepodge of ancient fictions, fables, and myths.

As Bishop Valdespino guided him along the pathway, Kirsch peered down the mountainside with a sardonic thought. *Moses climbed a mountain to accept the Word of God . . . and I have climbed a mountain to do quite the opposite.*

Kirsch's motivation for climbing this mountain, he had told himself, was one of ethical obligation, but he knew there was a good dose of hubris fueling this visit—he was eager to feel the gratification of sitting face-to-face with these clerics and foretelling their imminent demise.

You've had your run at defining our truth.

“I looked at your curriculum vitae,” the bishop said abruptly, glancing at Kirsch. “I see you're a product of Harvard University?”

“Undergraduate. Yes.”

“I see. Recently, I read that for the first time in Harvard's history, the incoming student body consists of more atheists and agnostics than those who identify as followers of any religion. That is quite a telling statistic, Mr. Kirsch.”

What can I tell you, Kirsch wanted to reply, our students keep getting smarter.

The wind whipped harder as they arrived at the ancient stone edifice. Inside the dim light of the building's entryway, the air was heavy with the thick fragrance of burning frankincense. The two men snaked through a maze of dark corridors, and Kirsch's eyes fought to adjust as he followed his cloaked host. Finally, they arrived at an unusually small wooden door. The bishop knocked, ducked down, and entered, motioning for his guest to follow.

Uncertain, Kirsch stepped over the threshold.

He found himself in a rectangular chamber whose high walls burgeoned with ancient leather-bound tomes. Additional freestanding bookshelves jutted out of the walls like ribs, interspersed with cast-iron radiators that clanged and hissed, giving the room the eerie sense that it was alive. Kirsch raised his eyes to the ornately balustraded walkway that encircled the second story and knew without a doubt where he was.

The famed library of Montserrat, he realized, startled to have been admitted. This sacred room was rumored to contain uniquely rare texts accessible only to those monks who had devoted their lives to God and who were sequestered here on this mountain.

"You asked for discretion," the bishop said. "This is our most private space. Few outsiders have ever entered."

"A generous privilege. Thank you."

Kirsch followed the bishop to a large wooden table where two elderly men sat waiting. The man on the left looked timeworn, with tired eyes and a matted white beard. He wore a crumpled black suit, white shirt, and fedora.

"This is Rabbi Yehuda Köves," the bishop said. "He is a prominent Jewish philosopher who has written extensively on Kabbalistic cosmology."

Kirsch reached across the table and politely shook hands with Rabbi Köves. "A pleasure to meet you, sir," Kirsch said. "I've read your books on Kabbala. I can't say I understood them, but I've read them."

Köves gave an amiable nod, dabbing at his watery eyes with his handkerchief.

"And here," the bishop continued, motioning to the other man, "you have the respected *allamah*, Syed al-Fadl."

The revered Islamic scholar stood up and smiled broadly. He was short and squat with a jovial face that seemed a mismatch with his dark penetrating eyes. He was dressed in an unassuming white *thawb*. "And,

Mr. Kirsch, I have read *your* predictions on the future of mankind. I can't say I *agree* with them, but I have read them."

Kirsch gave a gracious smile and shook the man's hand.

"And our guest, Edmond Kirsch," the bishop concluded, addressing his two colleagues, "as you know, is a highly regarded computer scientist, game theorist, inventor, and something of a prophet in the technological world. Considering his background, I was puzzled by his request to address the three of us. Therefore, I shall now leave it to Mr. Kirsch to explain why he has come."

With that, Bishop Valdespino took a seat between his two colleagues, folded his hands, and gazed up expectantly at Kirsch. All three men faced him like a tribunal, creating an ambience more like that of an inquisition than a friendly meeting of scholars. The bishop, Kirsch now realized, had not even set out a chair for him.

Kirsch felt more bemused than intimidated as he studied the three aging men before him. *So this is the Holy Trinity I requested. The Three Wise Men.*

Pausing a moment to assert his power, Kirsch walked over to the window and gazed out at the breathtaking panorama below. A sunlit patchwork of ancient pastoral lands stretched across a deep valley, giving way to the rugged peaks of the Collserola mountain range. Miles beyond, somewhere out over the Balearic Sea, a menacing bank of storm clouds was now gathering on the horizon.

Fitting, Kirsch thought, sensing the turbulence he would soon cause in this room, and in the world beyond.

"Gentlemen," he commenced, turning abruptly back toward them. "I believe Bishop Valdespino has already conveyed to you my request for secrecy. Before we continue, I just want to clarify that what I am about to share with you must be kept in the strictest confidence. Simply stated, I am asking for a vow of silence from all of you. Are we in agreement?"

All three men gave nods of tacit acquiescence, which Kirsch knew were probably redundant anyway. *They will want to bury this information—not broadcast it.*

"I am here today," Kirsch began, "because I have made a scientific discovery I believe you will find startling. It is something I have pursued for many years, hoping to provide answers to two of the most fundamental questions of our human experience. Now that I have succeeded, I have come to you specifically because I believe this information will affect the world's *faithful* in a profound way, quite possibly causing a shift that can only be described as, shall we say—disruptive. At the moment, I am

the only person on earth who has the information I am about to reveal to you.”

Kirsch reached into his suit coat and pulled out an oversized smartphone—one that he had designed and built to serve his own unique needs. The phone had a vibrantly colored mosaic case, and he propped it up before the three men like a television. In a moment, he would use the device to dial into an ultrasecure server, enter his forty-seven-character password, and live-stream a presentation for them.

“What you are about to see,” Kirsch said, “is a rough cut of an announcement I hope to share with the world—perhaps in a month or so. But before I do, I wanted to consult with a few of the world’s most influential religious thinkers, to gain insight into how this news will be received by those it affects most.”

The bishop sighed loudly, sounding more bored than concerned. “An intriguing preamble, Mr. Kirsch. You speak as if whatever you are about to show us will shake the foundations of the world’s religions.”

Kirsch glanced around the ancient repository of sacred texts. *It will not shake your foundations. It will shatter them.*

Kirsch appraised the men before him. What they did not know was that in only three days’ time, Kirsch planned to go public with this presentation in a stunning, meticulously choreographed event. When he did, people across the world would realize that the teachings of all religions did indeed have one thing in common.

They were all dead wrong.

CHAPTER 1

Professor Robert Langdon gazed up at the forty-foot-tall dog sitting in the plaza. The animal's fur was a living carpet of grass and fragrant flowers.

I'm trying to love you, he thought. I truly am.

Langdon pondered the creature a bit longer and then continued along a suspended walkway, descending a sprawling terrace of stairs whose uneven treads were intended to jar the arriving visitor from his usual rhythm and gait. *Mission accomplished*, Langdon decided, nearly stumbling twice on the irregular steps.

At the bottom of the stairs, Langdon jolted to a stop, staring at a massive object that loomed ahead.

Now I've seen it all.

A towering black widow spider rose before him, its slender iron legs supporting a bulbous body at least thirty feet in the air. On the spider's underbelly hung a wire-mesh egg sac filled with glass orbs.

"Her name is Maman," a voice said.

Langdon lowered his gaze and saw a slender man standing beneath the spider. He wore a black brocade sherwani and had an almost comical curling Salvador Dalí mustache.

"My name is Fernando," he continued, "and I'm here to welcome you to the museum." The man perused a collection of name tags on a table before him. "May I have your name, please?"

"Certainly. Robert Langdon."

The man's eyes shot back up. "Ah, I am so sorry! I did not recognize you, sir!"

I barely recognize myself, Langdon thought, advancing stiffly in his white bow tie, black tails, and white waistcoat. *I look like a Whiffenpoof*. Langdon's classic tails were almost thirty years old, preserved from his days as a member of the Ivy Club at Princeton, but thanks to his faithful daily regimen of swimming laps, the outfit still fit him fairly well. In

Langdon's haste to pack, he had grabbed the wrong hanging bag from his closet, leaving his usual tuxedo behind.

"The invitation said black and white," Langdon said. "I trust tails are appropriate?"

"Tails are a classic! You look dashing!" The man scurried over and carefully pressed a name tag to the lapel of Langdon's jacket.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," the mustached man said. "No doubt you've visited us before?"

Langdon gazed through the spider's legs at the glistening building before them. "Actually, I'm embarrassed to say, I've never been."

"No!" The man feigned falling over. "You're not a fan of modern art?"

Langdon had always enjoyed the *challenge* of modern art—primarily the exploration of why particular works were hailed as masterpieces: Jackson Pollock's drip paintings; Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans; Mark Rothko's simple rectangles of color. Even so, Langdon was far more comfortable discussing the religious symbolism of Hieronymus Bosch or the brushwork of Francisco de Goya.

"I'm more of a classicist," Langdon replied. "I do better with da Vinci than with de Kooning."

"But da Vinci and de Kooning are so *similar*!"

Langdon smiled patiently. "Then I clearly have a bit to learn about de Kooning."

"Well, you've come to the right place!" The man swung his arm toward the massive building. "In this museum, you will find one of the finest collections of modern art on earth! I do hope you enjoy."

"I intend to," Langdon replied. "I only wish I knew *why* I'm here."

"You and everyone else!" The man laughed merrily, shaking his head. "Your host has been very secretive about the purpose of tonight's event. Not even the museum staff knows what's happening. The *mystery* is half the fun of it—rumors are running wild! There are several hundred guests inside—many famous faces—and nobody has *any* idea what's on the agenda tonight!"

Now Langdon grinned. Very few hosts on earth would have the bravado to send out last-minute invitations that essentially read: *Saturday night. Be there. Trust me.* And even fewer would be able to persuade hundreds of VIPs to drop everything and fly to *northern Spain* to attend the event.

Langdon walked out from beneath the spider and continued along the pathway, glancing up at an enormous red banner that billowed overhead.

AN EVENING WITH EDMOND KIRSCH

Edmond has certainly never lacked confidence, Langdon thought, amused.

Some twenty years ago, young Eddie Kirsch had been one of Langdon's first students at Harvard University—a mop-haired computer geek whose interest in codes had led him to Langdon's freshman seminar: Codes, Ciphers, and the Language of Symbols. The sophistication of Kirsch's intellect had impressed Langdon deeply, and although Kirsch eventually abandoned the dusty world of semiotics for the shining promise of computers, he and Langdon had developed a student–teacher bond that had kept them in contact over the past two decades since Kirsch's graduation.

Now the student has surpassed his teacher, Langdon thought. *By several light-years.*

Today, Edmond Kirsch was a world-renowned maverick—a billionaire computer scientist, futurist, inventor, and entrepreneur. The forty-year-old had fathered an astounding array of advanced technologies that represented major leaps forward in fields as diverse as robotics, brain science, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology. And his accurate predictions about future scientific breakthroughs had created a mystical aura around the man.

Langdon suspected that Edmond's eerie knack for prognostication stemmed from his astoundingly broad knowledge of the world around him. For as long as Langdon could remember, Edmond had been an insatiable bibliophile—reading everything in sight. The man's passion for books, and his capacity for absorbing their contents, surpassed anything Langdon had ever witnessed.

For the past few years, Kirsch had lived primarily in Spain, attributing his choice to an ongoing love affair with the country's old-world charm, avant-garde architecture, eccentric gin bars, and perfect weather.

Once a year, when Kirsch returned to Cambridge to speak at the MIT Media Lab, Langdon would join him for a meal at one of the trendy new Boston hot spots that Langdon had never heard of. Their conversations were never about technology; all Kirsch ever wanted to discuss with Langdon was the arts.

"You're my culture connection, Robert," Kirsch often joked. "My own private bachelor of arts!"

The playful jab at Langdon's marital status was particularly ironic coming from a fellow bachelor who denounced monogamy as "an affront to evolution" and had been photographed with a wide range of super-models over the years.

Considering Kirsch's reputation as an innovator in computer science, one could easily have imagined him being a buttoned-up techno-nerd. But he had instead fashioned himself into a modern pop icon who moved in celebrity circles, dressed in the latest styles, listened to arcane underground music, and collected a wide array of priceless Impressionist and modern art. Kirsch often e-mailed Langdon to get his advice on new pieces of art he was considering for his collection.

And then he would do the exact opposite, Langdon mused.

About a year ago, Kirsch had surprised Langdon by asking him not about art, but about God—an odd topic for a self-proclaimed atheist. Over a plate of short-rib crudo at Boston's Tiger Mama, Kirsch had picked Langdon's brain on the core beliefs of various world religions, in particular their different stories of the Creation.

Langdon gave him a solid overview of current beliefs, from the Genesis story shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all the way through the Hindu story of Brahma, the Babylonian tale of Marduk, and others.

"I'm curious," Langdon asked as they left the restaurant. "Why is a futurist so interested in the past? Does this mean our famous atheist has finally found God?"

Edmond let out a hearty laugh. "Wishful thinking! I'm just sizing up my competition, Robert."

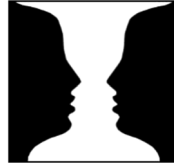
Langdon smiled. *Typical.* "Well, science and religion are not competitors, they're two different languages trying to tell the same story. There's room in this world for both."

After that meeting, Edmond had dropped out of contact for almost a year. And then, out of the blue, three days ago, Langdon had received a FedEx envelope with a plane ticket, a hotel reservation, and a handwritten note from Edmond urging him to attend tonight's event. It read: *Robert, it would mean the world to me if you of all people could attend. Your insights during our last conversation helped make this night possible.*

Langdon was baffled. Nothing about that conversation seemed remotely relevant to an event that would be hosted by a futurist.

The FedEx envelope also included a black-and-white image of two people standing face-to-face. Kirsch had written a short poem to Langdon.

Robert,
When you see me face-to-face,
I'll reveal the empty space.
—Edmond



Langdon smiled when he saw the image—a clever allusion to an episode in which Langdon had been involved several years earlier. The silhouette of a chalice, or Grail cup, revealed itself in the empty space between the two faces.

Now Langdon stood outside this museum, eager to learn what his former student was about to announce. A light breeze ruffled his jacket tails as he moved along the cement walkway on the bank of the meandering Nervión River, which had once been the lifeblood of a thriving industrial city. The air smelled vaguely of copper.

As Langdon rounded a bend in the pathway, he finally permitted himself to look at the massive, glimmering museum. The structure was impossible to take in at a glance. Instead, his gaze traced back and forth along the entire length of the bizarre, elongated forms.

This building doesn't just break the rules, Langdon thought. It ignores them completely. A perfect spot for Edmond.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, looked like something out of an alien hallucination—a swirling collage of warped metallic forms that appeared to have been propped up against one another in an almost random way. Stretching into the distance, the chaotic mass of shapes was draped in more than thirty thousand titanium tiles that glinted like fish scales and gave the structure a simultaneously organic and extraterrestrial feel, as if some futuristic leviathan had crawled out of the water to sun herself on the riverbank.

When the building was first unveiled in 1997, *The New Yorker* hailed its architect, Frank Gehry, as having designed “a fantastic dream ship of undulating form in a cloak of titanium,” while other critics around the world gushed, “The greatest building of our time!” “Mercurial brilliance!” “An astonishing architectural feat!”

Since the museum's debut, dozens of other "deconstructivist" buildings had been erected—the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, BMW World in Munich, and even the new library at Langdon's own alma mater. Each featured radically unconventional design and construction, and yet Langdon doubted any of them could compete with the Bilbao Guggenheim for its sheer shock value.

As Langdon approached, the tiled facade seemed to morph with each step, offering a fresh personality from every angle. The museum's most dramatic illusion now became visible. Incredibly, from this perspective, the colossal structure appeared to be quite literally floating on water, adrift on a vast "infinity" lagoon that lapped against the museum's outer walls.

Langdon paused a moment to marvel at the effect and then set out to cross the lagoon via the minimalist footbridge that arched over the glassy expanse of water. He was only halfway across when a loud hissing noise startled him. It was emanating from beneath his feet. He stopped short just as a swirling cloud of mist began billowing out from beneath the walkway. The thick veil of fog rose around him and then tumbled outward across the lagoon, rolling toward the museum and engulfing the base of the entire structure.

The Fog Sculpture, Langdon thought.

He had read about this work by Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya. The "sculpture" was revolutionary in that it was constructed out of the medium of visible air, a wall of fog that materialized and dissipated over time; and because the breezes and atmospheric conditions were never identical one day to the next, the sculpture was different every time it appeared.

The bridge stopped hissing, and Langdon watched the wall of fog settle silently across the lagoon, swirling and creeping as if it had a mind of its own. The effect was both ethereal and disorienting. The entire museum now appeared to be hovering over the water, resting weightlessly on a cloud—a ghost ship lost at sea.

Just as Langdon was about to set out again, the tranquil surface of the water was shattered by a series of small eruptions. Suddenly five flaming pillars of fire shot skyward out of the lagoon, thundering steadily like rocket engines that pierced the mist-laden air and threw brilliant bursts of light across the museum's titanium tiles.

Langdon's own architectural taste tended more to the classical stylings of museums like the Louvre or the Prado, and yet as he watched the fog and flame hover above the lagoon, he could think of no place more suit-

able than this ultramodern museum to host an event thrown by a man who loved art and innovation, and who glimpsed the future so clearly.

Now, walking through the mist, Langdon pressed on to the museum's entrance—an ominous black hole in the reptilian structure. As he neared the threshold, Langdon had the uneasy sense that he was entering the mouth of a dragon.