

**THE BOY  
WHO SET  
FIRE TO THE BIBLE**

by  
**Carl Daoust**



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To all talented authors struggling to get their work published.

Never give up. Do whatever you can to get your material out there.  
The rest will come.

To my Adobe-addicted Dad,  
whose talent, wizardry and perseverance  
have made this book possible.

# FOREWORD

Carl Daoust is one of nature's curiosities. Like Da Vinci himself, Carl's right and left brain each operate at full throttle, conspiring to produce the almost-unimaginable. Give him a pen and he'll blow you away.

Carl's creativity became apparent early on as he delivered one comic strip after another, then wrote an enchanting children's novel, upon which was conferred First Prize at the Montreal School Board Junior Book Awards. As a corporate branding strategist, he recently turned out a fascinating and insightful industry paper on the Cultural Code behind Gold. Though not composed in the conventional white-paper style, but rather as a story swarming with an eclectic collection of characters, it nevertheless won the Discovery Award.

This author concocts characters, places, plots and narratives that mesh together, taking you on a wild journey into the recesses of Carl's imagination. He intertwines historical facts with extreme fiction and iconoclasm, never afraid to rock time-honored dogma. If you seek fantasy, sf, alternative history, suspense, thrills and a maverick's disdain for convention, you've come to the right place.

Enjoy!

From James Halperin,  
best-selling author of *The Truth Machine* (Random House)  
and *The First Immortal* (Ballantine)

## CHAPTER 27

*Present day; New York.*

***“I can move! I can talk! I can walk!”***

*“Yes Pinocchio, I’ve given you life.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because tonight, Geppetto wished for a real boy.”*

*“Am I a real boy?”*

*“No, Pinocchio. To make Geppetto’s wish come true will be entirely up to you.”*

*“Up to me?”*

*“Prove yourself brave, truthful and unselfish, and someday you will be a real boy.”*

*“A real boy!”*

*“You must learn to choose between right and wrong.”*

*“Right... and wrong? But how will I know?”*

*“Your conscience will tell you.”*

“What’s a conscience, Theon?” Maya asked her eight-year older brother as she sat next to him on the sofa, both watching a video of Disney’s Pinocchio.

“Like the Blue Fairy says, it helps you make the difference between right and wrong,” explained Theon.

“But *what* is it?” urged on Maya, trying to imagine if she could detect a conscience if it came up to her.

Theon yawned in boredom. This was his fourteenth viewing of the movie; and each time he hoped to gain insight as to what it meant to be a normal boy. Because of his unusual physique and abilities, he felt far more empathically connected to the character of Pinocchio than any real boy he’d ever met. If the puppet, by his actions, could become a normal boy, why couldn’t he, by similar actions.

Maya tugged on Theon's sleeve. "Well, what's a conscience?"

"It's sort of a voice inside your head," simply said Theon. "It tells you what you should do, and what you shouldn't do. Got it?"

Maya wiggled her nose as she processed the answer. "Does it look like you and me? I bet your conscience really looks special."

"Why would you say that?" Theon was miffed by his sister's gratuitous assertion. It's enough he looked *special* on the outside, he didn't want his insides—*his spirit*—to be accused of aberration as well.

"Sorry." Maya stared at her lap in remorse. "I just figured your conscience must be like a super-hero...I mean...it did tell you to bring me back to life, didn't it?"

Theon was utterly surprised by her claim of the circumstances surrounding her birth. "What are you talking about?"

Maya grinned bashfully. "Mommy and daddy talk a lot in bed. I just lie down on the floor, at the foot of the door, and I listen."

"I think you should have your ears cleaned," said Theon, relegating her account to the imagination.

"You won't squeal on me, will you?" she begged. "I do it for you, so that you would know things."

Theon knew she was just a self-indulgent snoop, but was none the less impressed by his sister's entrepreneurial albeit surreptitious streak. "I won't tell them...as long as you repeat everything they say to me; deal?"

Maya slapped Theon's open palm with hers, happy to be her big brother's informant. "We're kind of secret agents, now, just like daddy and Aunt Sophie. And they tell each other everything, right?"

"You're really sneaky, you know that," said Theon, realizing Maya had maneuvered him into indulging her request to describe his *super-hero* conscience. "But why just talk about what it looks like?" he reckoned. "Why not show you what my conscience looks like."

Theon sprung out of the sofa and grabbed his sister's hand. "Follow me, pipsqueak!"

Theon ran upstairs, his sister in tow, to the end of the corridor where the trapdoor to the attic hung over their heads. Opening the door to the closet where Sarah kept bathroom cloths and bed sheets, Theon retrieved a four-foot stick outfitted with a hook, and inserted the hook in a ring dangling at the end of a short rope tied to the trapdoor. He pulled down with all his might, and the trapdoor rotated downwards, revealing a staircase.

"I don't think this is a good idea," admonished Maya. "Mommy has forbidden us to go up there."

Theon knew this well, but decided the thrill of adventure far surpassed the possible repercussions. Besides, he never missed an opportunity to awe his sister with his clever tricks. “Mom’s at the market and Dad’s at Uncle Amadeo’s. We won’t get caught.”

Working their way up the attic stairs like mice looking for that choice piece of cheese, Theon switched on the single 60-watt light bulb, which barely provided enough light to guide their steps, while Maya had already begun rummaging through all the forgotten treasures surrounding her.

“One little ducky; two little duckies; *three* little duckies! Ah, ah, ah!” cried out Maya after picking up a dusty copy of *Sesame Street’s Counting with the Count*. “I am a vampire,” smiling freakishly and flaunting her white teeth like the living dead on the prowl for blood. “I’m going to bite you on the neck,” she warned Theon, who had proceeded to the far end of the attic.

Right under the attic window, he spotted his crib, covered with a blanket and partially hidden by Maya’s crib. Only the mobile set, affixed to the head of the crib, stuck out from under the blanket. Two of the four toy replicas which originally hung from the mobile structure had been torn away. This observation disturbed Theon, who wondered why his parents would have done this. After all, he wasn’t tall enough at the time to reach the toys; and had he tried to climb the bars of the crib, surely he would have toppled over.

“I’m going to bite you,” reiterated Maya, who trotted to Theon and grabbed his hips.

“Get off of me!” shouted Theon, pushing her away.

“You said we were going to have fun,” pouted Maya, who sat heavily on the floor and clearly expressed her sulkiness. “You’re a liar.”

“We’ll have fun in a minute,” he assured her as he rolled her crib to the side, and pulled the blanket off his own crib. “What the hell?” he hollered, quoting his father’s favorite exclamation. Four of the eight aluminum bars on one side of the crib were completely ripped off, while three on the other side were severely bent. In addition, a nine-inch hole had been melted through the center of the aluminum head board.

“Wow!” screamed Maya, brandishing her arms in the air. “You *are* a super-hero with super powers. I knew it. You’re Superman!”

Theon glared at Maya in reprobation. “I’m no darn super-hero.”

“Hey, don’t blame me,” she retorted harshly. “I didn’t do this. I just heard mommy tell daddy she was worried about your *unproductable power*.”

Theon was skeptical about Maya’s account. “She said *unproductable power*?”

“Yeah!” snapped back Maya. “I know what power means, but unproductable...beats me.”

The word Maya was searching for was *unpredictable*—a word she could not have invented on her own. And Theon now knew his mother was not just guilty of acute motherly concern, but was also very concerned her son was increasingly becoming a loose cannon.

He felt very ambivalent about what to do with this new and alarming information. “Do mommy and daddy also say they love me?” he asked his sister, hoping love would conquer all.

Maya hesitated. “I, er...I,,,”

The longer Maya vacillated, the more Theon’s face grew angry and ever so frightening, a face Maya had never seen before. “You’re scaring me!” she cried, her lips quivering.

Theon was appalled at the ease with which he lost control, and even more aghast at the fear he provoked in Maya. “I didn’t mean to scare you,” he reassured his sister before sitting down next to her. “I just feel so different than everybody else. And I’m always scared people will find out I’m not like them and hate me.”

Maya rested her head on Theon’s arm. “I’m not afraid of you. You’re the best brother in the world.”

“Thanks, little sister.” Theon wrapped his arm around Maya’s waist. “I used to feel at home here, but now I’m not sure. I’m not even sure mom and dad love me as much as before.”

“They do,” said a guilt-riddled Maya, who now regretted withholding this information moments before. “They say they love you so many times in bed, a lot more times than they love me. I’m jealous. I wish I was different too.”

“You are,” said Theon with frank conviction. “You’re the only girl with a brother like me.” They both chuckled as their spirits began to lift, and their childish glee resumed its course. “Now, let’s have fun.”

Theon directed his attention at two stacked full-length mirrors leaning against the wall a few feet from the light bulb. Selecting the one on top—the only one with a stand—he placed it under the light bulb, directly facing the other mirror, which he straightened in a perfect upright position by shoving a box against it.

“Come stand next to me. We’re going to play my version of *Bloody Mary*,” Theon told Maya.

Bloody Mary was the children’s game of summoning an evil and vengeful witch of the same name. This was done by standing in a room, with one lit candle or dim light, and calling the name “Bloody Mary” into a mirror three times in a row. It was only the bravest of children who would attempt to participate in this game since summoning the witch could result in: the horrific appearance of the witch; serious bodily injury; imprisonment in the mirror;

insanity; or death. Using two mirrors was believed to increase the likelihood of success of the morbid experiment.

“My version is called *Ghost Knight*,” remarked Theon. “That’s the name I give my spirit, my conscience. If we stare in the mirror and say his name three times in a row, he’ll appear in one of the mirrors. You’ll be able to see what he looks like.”

Maya seemed unsure. “Is it going to be scary?”

Theon coaxed her on. “You did say you wanted to see what he looked like?”

“Yeah, I guess,” she conceded.

Theon held her tight. “On the count of three, we say his name together. One...two...three!”

“Ghost Knight...Ghost Knight...Ghost Knight!” They both peered deeply into the mirror, anticipating some sort of manifestation; but nothing happened. Theon stared in the mirror behind him, but there was nothing there either.

He tried calling the spirit on his own, but his second attempt was equally futile. “Why isn’t this working?” he muttered in disappointment. “There has to be a way.”

“Maybe he’s shy,” conjectured Maya, who quickly lost interest and returned to her earlier treasure-hunting.

“Or he doesn’t recognize the name Ghost Knight,” considered Theon. “But what else should I call him?” This was quite a conundrum.

“I have an idea,” announced Maya, who had foraged through a box labeled *Cameron/Electronics*. The box contained earlier models of cell phones and i-pods, an old laptop, two bulky traditional cameras and one digital camera. “We can take a picture of the Ghost Knight with this *magical* camera,” pulling the digital camera out of the box.

“It’s called a *digital* camera, Maya,” pointed out Theon, “not a magical camera.” But then again, what did he have to lose, he thought. It was no sillier than the current rules of the game. Perhaps the game needed to be revitalized with a more contemporary component to recapture its mythical potency. “Bring the magical camera over here.”

“We make a good FBI team, don’t we, Theon?” she postured proudly, gladly handing him the camera. “We should take lots of pictures to make sure.”

Theon checked to see if the camera had a memory stick inserted into it. It did. And the battery, to his surprise, was still partially charged—the camera probably had been put in storage only recently since Theon’s father had bought a new one two weeks ago.

“Ok Maya, you stand here.” Theon positioned her next to him, six inches apart. “Raise your arms above your head and hold the camera. “He placed it in her hands and flipped open the display screen. “Twist your arms a bit; ok... perfect aim,” he exclaimed after checking the screen. “You’re spot on the middle of the mirror. Now, the automatic adjustment is on; and the automatic timer is set to go...now!”

Theon moved in position. “Stay still, Maya. It’ll take ten seconds.”

“My arms hurt,” moaned Maya.

“Ghost Knight...Ghost Knight...Ghost Knight. Another two, one, and—” The camera clicked sharply. “Good work, Maya,” congratulated Theon after examining the picture in the screen. “Let’s take one more.”

“There will be *no* more pictures,” suddenly roared an indignant voice coming from the stairs. A head stuck out from the attic trap. Daddy had returned.

## CHAPTER 28

**“You both know the attic is off limits,”** Cameron reminded his son and daughter. “Your mother is going to be pissed when she finds out you were up here.”

“I’m sorry daddy. I won’t do it again,” promised Maya, who now dreaded her mother’s return from the market.

“I’m not blaming you, honey,” said Cameron as he glared fiercely at Theon. “Your *older* brother should have known better. Now, run along while I speak to him.”

Maya scampered off hastily, but not before waving at Theon. He wasn’t quite sure whether his sister was waving goodbye or good luck. Had he the choice, he would have opted for good luck, of which he needed in ample quantity to be spared his father’s wrath.

“So, what now?” asked Theon, who readied himself for a draconian tongue lashing.

“Why did you come to the attic?” sternly demanded Cameron.

“I needed stuff to play a game with Maya,” honestly replied Theon.

Cameron had never known his son to lie, but given the right set of circumstances, he believed he could. “No other reason?”

Theon immediately understood what his father was getting at—the crib. “I really didn’t know about it, nor do I remember it, or what I did to it. I swear, dad.”

Cameron stared into Theon’s eyes, searching for any trace of deception. All he could report was an impenetrable layer of pleading innocence; what dwelled behind it, he could not discern. Nevertheless, what he did see was grounds enough for forgiveness.

“I believe you, Theon,” said Cameron as he simmered down. “Your mother will too, I’m sure.”

His father having renewed ties with his congenial disposition, Theon saw an opening and mobilized enough courage to ask a few questions of his own. “Dad, if I were to look through the boxes, would I find other stuff that I’ve broken as a toddler?”

“Plenty,” candidly replied Cameron. “Your mother doesn’t throw anything out—especially your stuff.”

“But my stuff isn’t broken the way other kids’ stuff is broken, right?” Theon probed further.

Cameron contemplated the question, and, in that moment, decided his eight-year son was old enough to handle certain truths. He was also exceptionally bright, articulate and mature for his age—another argument in favor of admission. Whether his wife would agree with disclosure at this time, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Cameron took a deep breath and began. “The first thing you should know is that we found you within the walls of a damp and dirty well, and not within those of a warm and comfortable hospital. That, in combination with your unique physical attributes and abilities, has cast an ominous shadow over your unknown origin.”

Theon remained unusually calm. “Are you saying the people who abandoned me did so because they were afraid of me?”

“Not necessarily,” replied Cameron. “Maybe they were trying to save you from someone or something terrible.”

“Someone who wanted me for my abilities,” surmised Theon.

“Could be,” concurred Cameron. “When you were three and four years old—and still lacking awareness of and control over your powers—you did things no one could ever conceive—most of them disturbing. It stopped for a few years, and your mother and I were hopeful, but it started again just after your sixth birthday. You may not remember, but you have done and can do far more than you think. *Far more.*”

“Like raising the dead, for example,” said Theon, expecting an acknowledgement from his father.

“You remember that?” said a startled Cameron.

“Not precisely,” replied Theon, refraining from expanding on the subject. “Dad, sometimes I’m more worried about what’s going on in my head than what I’m able to do— as scary as that might be.”

“Have you discussed this with your psychiatrist?” queried Cameron, who, after four years of consultation, had not heard anything of substance from Theon’s therapist. “Theon is secretive and somewhat of an enigma,” the therapist often said.

“I just don’t trust her,” Theon said plainly; “never did.”

“You could have told your mother and me this a long time ago,” pointed out Cameron, who kept his cool, and for good reason—this was the first time he and his son had a semblance of an authentic, open conversation.

“My going to therapy seemed to make you and mom happy,” explained Theon. “Why interfere with that...and why interfere with *your* goal of a *picture-perfect* family?”

“What’s this business of a picture-perfect family?” angrily spouted Sarah as she popped up from the attic trap. “And what is Theon doing here?”

Without thinking twice, Cameron elected to preserve the confidentiality of the conversation, and protect the newfound trust established between Theon and him. “Oh, I was just showing Theon my old digital camera. I thought he could use it to take family photos.”

“And we were using the mirror to experiment with lighting,” cleverly added Theon, while Cameron discretely moved in Sarah’s plain view of the incriminating crib.

Sarah shot a suspicious look at the dubious duo. “Riiiiight! Now put that mirror back in its place and come down. Supper will be ready in 20 minutes.” She dashed down the stairs, yelling, “and Theon, go get your sister from her room.”

“Tell your sister to keep quiet about the attic affair,” Cameron whispered to his son. “I’ll take care of the crib.”

“Aye Aye, sir!” replied Theon, who was thoroughly enjoying the complicity with his father. He rushed downstairs, fully intent on reducing his sister to silence.

After putting back everything as it was, Cameron also engaged the stairs, all the while skimming through the pictures stored on the camera’s memory stick. “I had forgotten about these photos,” he thought to himself. All the photos involved Theon’s eighth birthday, except for one—the one taken by Maya minutes ago.

When he got to it, he stopped short. The shot was remarkable and extraordinarily beautiful. By placing two mirrors opposite each other, Theon had engineered an infinite image-multiplication effect. Each reflection off one mirror traveled to the other mirror, reflecting against that one and returning to the first mirror, and repeated the process a second time...and a third time...a fourth, and so on, without end.

*(example of infinite image-multiplication effect)*



“I’m going to frame this picture and put it on my office wall, right above my—what’s this?” While scrutinizing the picture, Cameron noticed something odd: Theon’s image seemed to be distorted as of the fourth reflection. And the further down the reflections, the more distorted it became. However, after closer inspection, he concluded the phenomenon was more a case of image mutation than image distortion. He was utterly fascinated.

“I’ll be in my office,” Cameron notified his wife as he marched through the kitchen to his home office. “No interruptions, please.”

“Supper in 15 minutes, Cam; don’t forget.” Sarah hoped he hadn’t been called on business again. His frequent absence during supper time was becoming problematic. Despite her appreciation of the nature and the constraints of his job, her coping mechanisms had begun to fail her. He was a hero, and rightly so, but she never wanted a hero, she wanted a husband. Unfortunately, like many husbands, he was oblivious to his wife’s plight; and more so today as the mystery of the bizarre photo consumed him totally.

Sitting at his desk by his computer, Cameron connected the memory stick to a USB port, and then called up the FBI intranet and entered his primary password and secondary counter codes. *Level five security clearance* read the computer screen. After navigating through several page layers, he accessed the FBI 2DARE (*2-dimensional absolute reconstruction engine*) software program, an advanced artificial intelligence program performing two-dimensional facial reconstructions based on ante-mortem photographs.

Uploading the photograph of interest into the program, he began running it. The computer was quick to respond:

*“Multiple entities detected.”*

Cameron responded through a flexible query system:

“Number entities based on size, from largest to smallest. Stop numbering at ten.” Images beyond the tenth reflection were simply too small and lacked workable resolution.

*“Activity complete.”*

“How many entities are identical to entity #1, irrespective of relative size?”

*“Entities #2 and #3 are identical to entity #1.”*

“Do elements of entity #1 appear in entities #4 through #10?”

*“Affirmative.”*

“Remove those elements from entity #4 through #10, and display separately in one view, and in equal size using entity #1 as reference. Remove original background from all generated pictures.”

*“Activity complete.”*

Cameron probed each of the seven pictures, but could not distinguish anything of significance. Each picture was a motley assortment of facial features, one different from the other. He would try something specific.

“Are the elements of entity #4 congruent between themselves?”

“*Negative.*”

“How many sub-entities are included in entity #4?”

“*Insufficient data.*”

“Damn!” Cameron was frustrated, but would not admit defeat. “Overlay entities #4 through #10, and display. Label composite entity as #11.”

“*Activity complete.*”

“How many sub-entities are included in entity #11?”

“*Four sub-entities detected. Congruence factor for each sub-entity above critical level, and calculated at 88.6%, 82.1%, 79.5%, 73.3%, respectively.*”

“What is causing congruence interference?”

“*Each sub-entity respectively includes similar but competing residual data. Quantity not sufficient to prevent rendering.*”

“Specify using a random example.”

“*Example provided. Sub-entity includes two sets of eyes, similar in physicality but not identical.*”

“What is the protocol in such a case?”

“*Blending of physical features is recommended.*”

“Apply protocol, and display sub-entities, full screen, and sequentially from highest congruence factor to lowest.”

“*Activity complete. Press space bar to begin display.*”

The first picture Cameron saw was a Caucasian man, probably in his thirties, with almond eyes, shoulder-length reddish brown hair with a short beard and goatee. By all standards, he was a handsome specimen. The man’s stare followed Cameron, no matter the angle from which he gazed at him; and he felt such benevolence exuding from the man’s face. If this sub-entity, as the computer called it, was part of Theon, then perhaps he could finally banish all his concerns about his son’s future—surely he would become a good man, even a man of the people.

The second picture created much the same impression, but at a different level. It looked like a man covered entirely of red-hot silver, which shimmered as if the silver had just been poured over him. Although Cameron could barely make out the facial features, he was convinced the *Tin-Man* was smiling at him. “You look like a man who’s just received the biggest of hearts,” he mumbled, alluding to the Wizard of Oz. “But who are you? What are you?”

Cameron proceeded to the third picture. This one left no room for interpretation. It conjured the most terrifying of childhood nightmares in Cam-

eron—nightmares that always sent him running to the safety of his parents' bed. "Good Lord, what the hell does this mean?" he uttered nervously as he examined the unadulterated manifestation of a demonic creature. Its crimson red skin oozed with sweat gorged with brimstone; its heinous catlike green eyes cursed its petrified onlookers; and its sharp teeth dripped with the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

But the disconcerting emotions these tokens of depravity and turpitude stirred in Cameron were nothing compared to the devilish ears whose pointed ends bent forwards like harpoon guns poised to release their poison arrows. The revolting ears looked so much like Theon's ears. "Let it be just a deplorable coincidence," he trusted. But he knew he was dabbling with wishful thinking. Perhaps the next picture would restore hope.

"She's beautiful," he thought as the fourth picture appeared. The woman's face was soft and lovely. Her long brown hair cascaded down her shoulders; her hazel eyes twinkled; and her slightly arched nose added character to the ensemble. But it was her discreet smile that stole the show—it was simply bewitching.

Somehow, Cameron knew this face. There was something about it that was so familiar, so much so it triggered an astute idea.

"Computer; based on the residual data, how many distinct variations of this sub-entity can be produced without blending?"

*"Specify differential factor."*

*"20% of elements must be different from one variation to the other."*

*"Activity complete. Eight variations produced."*

*"Display sequentially."*

Cameron went through the pictures, his anticipation and sense of familiarity increasing with each picture, until he reached the sixth one. All hell broke loose. "God preserve me!" He couldn't believe his eyes, nor could he fathom the meaning of what appeared on his computer screen. It was, in all its intricate and never foreseen details, a perfect picture of his wife Sarah.

# CHAPTER 31

*Circa 2,000 years ago; Galilee.*

**“Joseph, what are you doing here?”** asked a flustered Mary. “You know full well you cannot see me without my parents’ oversight.”

“What is there to oversee?” Joseph, one of the most skilled carpenters in Nazareth, pulled out a clay angel from the sack he carried and presented it to Mary. “It took me a day to carve this for you with my special knife. Consider it a symbol of our imminent union before God.”

Mary’s guard fell as she seized the small sculpture and scrutinized it meticulously, admiring every minute detail. “You are quite the wizard of carpentry, my love. It’s exquisite.”

“Where shall we set it?” deliberated Joseph, inspecting every potential location in the modest house. “Perhaps the locus of our humble abode will do it justice.” Joseph deposited the work of art in the middle of the table of the main room. “From there it shall stand, and from there it shall bless the food that you share every evening.”

“Let it also reveal to all the love that binds us together,” added Mary. “Let it be our messenger, that all shall come to know of our perfect rapture.”

“Beware of messengers carrying false prophecies,” warned a stranger who abruptly erupted into Mary’s parents’ domicile. The mysterious outlander wore a thick oversized robe and hunched forward, bearing a hump that spanned the entirety of his back. In contrast to his badly misshapen form, his facial features were nothing less than angelic.

“You have no business here,” screamed Joseph who moved between the intruder and his wife-to-be. “Take your place in the dirt and the dust that fill the cracks of the decaying streets, among your brethren, the beggars.”

“I am here to beg, but not for subsidization,” pleaded the man. “I beg only for thy consideration and thy deference.”

“You have the wrong house,” barked an unflinching Joseph. “No one will listen to you here.”

“I will listen,” said Mary as she appealed her betrothed to restraint and tolerance. She proceeded past Joseph, coming face to face with the stranger. “Speak,” she ordered him, her eyes never leaving his. He felt the warmth and kindness concealed behind her brazenness. “Do not make fools out of me and my beloved,” she cautioned him. He remained unaffected by her admonition.

“I am Gabriel the Archangel, and I once stood at the Throne of Glory, at the left hand of God,” staunchly proclaimed the outsider, removing his robe and unveiling his majestic white wings.

Both Mary and Joseph dropped to their knees. “You are God’s servant,” cried out Mary, holding her hands in prayer.

“I was at one time,” sadly said Gabriel. “Now I am but a slave—a slave enjoying a brief reprieve from his cage.”

“Has God turned against you?” queried Joseph whose incredulity quickly faded away.

“My temerity and my recklessness were ultimately my undoing,” avowed Gabriel without expanding on the subject. “As for thee, take heed. Thou that art highly favored, the Dark Lord seeks thee: cursed art thou among women.”

Mary was shocked by his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. Gabriel went on and said unto her, “Fear much, Mary: for the darkness thou sustains within hast long found disfavor with the God of Light. And, beware, thou must not conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, for he shall be troubled and be drawn into the darkness a hundred fold, and shall be called the emissary of Destruction, the bedrock of begotten bedlam. The Dark Lord shall launch unto his spawn his sword and release the Darkness upon God’s kingdom: on Earth and in Heaven. The suffering shall know no end.”

Confused, Mary asked to the angel, “How shall this be, must I deny my betrothed?”

And the angel answered and said unto her, “Do not mind Joseph. Instead, guard against Evil under the guise of The Holy Spirit; he shall come upon thee, and the power of the Darkest shall overshadow thee; deny him, repel him, cast him out.”

“What if Evil has already crossed the threshold of our dwelling?” bravely postulated Mary who was becoming weary of the angel’s allegations. “Having taken the semblance of an angel bearing a false omen.”

“What are you saying?” interjected Joseph. “Believe your eyes, woman, lest he strikes us down.”

“My eyes can be deceived, but not my heart,” replied Mary as she stood up while Joseph kept to the ground. “Who sent you? Was it our Lord God?”

Gabriel hesitated before answering. “I come of my own volition, but if my Lord were privy to my task, he would sanction my actions. Believe what thou will; perhaps thy kinswoman shall judge otherwise, and the ponderous chain of havoc shall be broken.”

“Of what kinswoman do you speak?” asked an intrigued Mary.

Ignoring Mary’s query, Gabriel moved to the entrance and peeked outside. “They know of my escape and they are coming for me. I can waste no more time here.” And as suddenly as he had appeared, he disappeared, claiming his robe on the way out.

Joseph sat at the table and picked up his angel sculpture and slowly rotated it, scouring every curve for likenesses to Gabriel. “An omen mayhaps,” he thought. He then gazed at Mary and sighed, “What must we do now?”

“Wait for this Spirit,” she simply said. “If I am to be the handmaid of a Lord...good or evil, I fancy knowing which.” Mary contained her dread as best she could.

## CHAPTER 33

*Present day; Germany.*

**“Calling the police was a very risky move,”**

remarked Sophie as she and her brother Cameron reached the outskirts of the Reinhardswald forest, an impressive range of hills in the Weser Uplands in the German district of Kassel, and home to countless myths and legends, like the Grimm’s Fairy Tales.

“I doubt very much misses Lorenz knew her husband’s true identity,” assumed Cameron. Adalia Lorenz was wife to Adam Gardner, a gentle and quiet man who, unbeknownst to the townspeople of Beverungen, had been formerly known as Adam Yahiyeh Gadahn, a prominent terrorist involved in a number of al-Qaida missions. He had been placed on the FBI’s most wanted list shortly after 9/11.

He was also on his wife’s wanted list since he had failed to return from a business trip to London, five days ago. This was the first time he had been this late. Her distress was compounded by the recent presence of an unknown man who strolled by her house numerous times a day, and the subsequent disappearance of Roy, her 8-year old son. She was convinced the two events were connected—as were Cameron and Sophie after identifying Gadahn from family photos. It was likely to them that the serial child killer had struck again, now for the ninth time.

“I don’t know how much longer I can tolerate this,” said Sophie bitterly. “While all the murdered children might have been the sons of terrorists, they’re innocent, more so even than the children of upstanding parents.”

“How so?” asked Cameron.

“Well, these poor children have been protected from a truth *far more* monstrous and revolting than the trivial truths most parents suppress,” said Sophie, “presumably for the children’s sake and not their own.”

“Innocence is fleeting, Sophie,” noted Cameron, “especially when it’s prematurely extinguished. Let’s hope Roy hasn’t met with the lethal payload of a speeding bullet—at least not yet.”

Aided by eight other search teams, spreading out in other directions, the FBI duo marched towards *Tilly’s Lair*, a stone tower built in 1885 in memory of Johann Tserclaes, Count of Tilly, who commanded the Imperial forces in the seventeenth century Thirty Years War. Originally designed as a military outpost, the tower has since become a tourist attraction.

“Hello!” shouted Cameron. “Anybody in the tower?”

“In the back!” a voice answered loudly. “The restaurant is in the back!”

Circling the building, they came upon an old man wearing a dirty apron, and tending a modest cafeteria-style bistro, attached to the foot of the tower. “I recommend the bretzels, the specialty of the house,” said the cook, shoving the local delicacy under Cameron’s nose. “Smells good, doesn’t it?”

“Another time,” replied Cameron with the utmost tact. “Have you seen the boy in this photograph?”

“Hum, I think I most certainly have,” believed the cook, after snatching the photo from Cameron’s hand. “This is the Gardner boy. He comes here every week; bought himself a cheese burger just yesterday; said he was going to the crash site; made me swear not to tell his mother.”

“What crash site?” interjected Sophie.

“A Messerschmitt Me 323 Gigant—a German military transport aircraft of World War II—crashed in the hills of Reinhardswald in the Fall of 1941,” explained the cook. “Of the crew of five, only Colonel General Ernst Udet survived. Rumor has it Udet caused the crash landing and killed the surviving flight engineer and radio operator.”

“Why would a high-commander kill his own people?” queried Sophie.

“For the oldest reason in the world,” said the cook: “Greed. The plane was apparently carrying merchandise worth millions, stolen from the Polish aristocracy, and earmarked for Hitler’s personal fortune. Udet wanted it for himself and hid it somewhere in the Weser Uplands, an area spanning over ten thousand square miles.”

“Hitler must have been outraged by Udet’s betrayal,” surmised Cameron.

“Udet told Hitler the plane had been pillaged by villagers,” said the cook, “and as a lone and injured man, he could not prevent it. Udet died a week later, lauded as a hero who had perished in flight while testing a new weapon. He had, in fact, committed suicide, probably petrified by the savage torture that awaited him.”

“The Grimm brothers would have made quite a fairy tale out of your story,” thought Cameron. “Just add a dragon and a tribe of trolls, and you’re off to the races.”

“Speaking of races,” said Sophie, “We’re racing against the clock. Aside from the crashed plane, where else would you suggest we search?”

“The plane is two miles up the hill over there.” The cook pointed upwards in a North-western direction. “If you don’t find him there, look to the surrounding caves; many of them are deserted *brown coal* mining shafts, sealed for the most part. He might be in one of them.”

“Thank you!” Cameron shook his hand. “You’ve been quite forthcoming.” And off they went, onwards and upwards, all the while praying for the boy’s welfare.

## CHAPTER 34

“**Roy!**” cried out Cameron as he entered the broken body of the plane and searched every nook and cranny. “Roy, are you here?” he persisted with greater intensity, moving frontwards to the cockpit. The boy was nowhere to be found.

“Let’s proceed to the top of the hill,” proposed Sophie. “We’ll zigzag downwards in horizontal strips half a mile long, and inspect every cave along our path.”

“Makes sense,” acknowledged Cameron. “Lead the way.” They walked for hours, scouring cave after cave without success, until they came upon the entrance of a century-old mine. The wooden beams lodged along the entrance perimeter were somewhat rotten, and threatened to collapse under any further pressure applied against them. The wooden door, however, had been strengthened with steel rails, its padlock lying on the ground broken.

“If these beams are any indication of the mine’s overall condition,” uneasily said Cameron, “we might find ourselves buried under a thousand pounds of earth and rock.”

“Someone wasn’t at all concerned about that.” Sophie crouched and examined the dirt by the entrance. “Fresh footprints. Two sets going in, one about twelve inches long, the other about five inches long. And one set coming out, also about twelve inches long—presumably the same person—and very tall to boot.”

“That certainly matches misses Lorenz’s and the NY Downtown Hospital nurse’s description of the suspect,” recognized Cameron. “The small print undoubtedly belongs to a child.”

“Yes, it does,” agreed Sophie, probing the print closely. “The child was running. See how deep the indentations are, and how wide apart they are. The tall man, however, seems to have entered and exited at a leisurely pace. Not uncommon for a predator brimming with confidence over securing his prey.”

“Are you ready?” Cameron said rhetorically as he and his partner pulled out their revolvers and flashlights, opened the door, and penetrated the cave stealthily. The circular projections of lights danced gracefully along the

walls—an overture to a performance that would hopefully climax with the safe recovery of a child. Thirty feet in, they faced their first dilemma: a fork in the passage way.

“I recommend we stay together.” Cameron took a few steps into the passage on the left. “I have a feeling this is the way. We can always backtrack if it’s no—” Without warning, the steel blade of a shovel rocketed downwards, bashing the unsuspecting FBI agent on the forehead. He keeled over, hitting the ground heavily.

Sophie fired four rounds into the darkness before being violently pushed to the ground face first and pinned down by the assailant’s knee. “I have no quarrel with you. We have the same purpose: to cleanse the world of evil before the grapes of the apocalypse ripen. I am sorry you are *here*.”

Dazed, Sophie looked up and saw the man bounce to his feet and run to the entrance. She crawled to her pistol, grabbed it, and aimed at the entrance. The man was already gone. Turning on her back, she lay there and called out: “Cameron! Cameron! Are you conscious?” She rubbed the back of her aching neck, and discovered blood on her fingers. “I got him, Cameron. He’s bleeding.”

“As am I,” groaned Cameron, who withdrew his walkie-talkie and tried to alert the other search teams. “No signal. Must be the rocks.” Cameron pushed himself up and sat, while Sophie made better progress, finally standing.

After running out of the cave and notifying the search teams, she returned and entered the left passage, pointing her flashlight directly ahead. “I see a wall of loose rocks blocking the passage, about fifteen feet away.”

“Coming,” said Cameron as he rose and lumbered erratically behind Sophie. Aiming his flashlight at the bottom right of the rock wall, he spotted an old mining cart, lying on its side and firmly pressed against the rocks. To the left of the wall, Cameron discovered a vertical shaft about ten feet in diameter, and plunging twenty-five feet deep. Hanging over the mouth of the shaft was a wooden platform held in place by a series of ropes and pulleys that could be operated to lower and raise the platform.

Testing its sturdiness, Cameron then gazed at the bottom. “There’s another level.”

“You’re not going down there, not in your condition,” ordered Sophie, who often exhorted him not to delve into reckless behavior. “Help me with the cart instead.”

“What about it?” asked Cameron. “You want to ride in it?”

“No, you dork,” retorted Sophie. “Look at the dirt marks behind the cart. It was pushed against the wall.” The FBI duo mustered the strength they had

left and pulled the cart away, revealing a small cavity that extended to the other side of the wall, just big enough for a young child to crawl through.

“Roy!” Sophie yelled into the hole. “Are you in there?”

A faint voice riddled with fear answered: “You won’t let me go home if I come out now. You want to hurt me. Go away!”

“Don’t be afraid, Roy,” Sophie pleaded. “My name is Sophie, and I’m here with my brother Cameron. We’re from the police.”

“I don’t believe you,” Roy shouted. “That’s what the man said when he found me playing in the plane. He tried to grab me. I asked to see his badge—you know, like in the movies—but he didn’t have one. So I ran through the forest and the hills, to my hiding place.”

“He found you, didn’t he?” Sophie aimed the flashlight at her badge. “Peek into the hole, Roy, so you can see my shinny badge.”

“I want to see your brother’s face first,” demanded Roy, desperate for proof the mean stranger had not returned. “The man had a bushy mustache. Do you have one?”

Indulging the boy’s request, Sophie moved aside while Cameron prostrated himself before the cavity, squirming in pursuit of a comfortable position. His left foot kicked a few times, striking a small pile of rocks resting at the base of the wall.

“Be careful, Cam,” implored Sophie as she shed light on the crumbled pile, only to reveal an object wrapped in all too familiar blue satin cloth with a golden symbol on it.

Releasing the object from the cloth, Sophie was appalled by she found: eight military issue M112 blocks of C-4 explosives, connected to a detonator, and a timer counting down—there were three seconds left before detonation.

## CHAPTER 35

**Three seconds; two seconds.** Sophie, reacting strictly on instinct, threw the bomb into the vertical mining shaft. “Stay put!” she screamed at Cameron, throwing herself onto the ground. One second; zero. The bomb exploded two-thirds way down the shaft.

The force of the explosion shook the entire mine, triggering a massive cave-in. Earth and rocks fell everywhere, tumbling over each other, and a thick suffocating cloud of dust rose, instantly saturating every passage way. It took 20 seconds until the last chunk of rock plummeted to the ground, rolling over Cameron’s left leg.

“Cameron! Speak to me!” shouted Sophie, covered in dust and powdered rock, and looking like a very creepy ghost. She had been fortunate: only pebble-size rocks had showered her body. Apart from several bruises, she was otherwise unscathed.

Cameron, on the other hand, had been battered by larger rocks, severed from the stone wall. While his upper body and head had been largely spared, his legs had been severely pelted. “I think my left leg is broken... and I can’t feel my right one. What about the kid?”

“Roy! ROY! Are you ok?” Sophie cried out loudly. “ROY! Answer me!”

“I’m ok,” replied Roy, in a trembling voice that was far clearer and more distinct than before; “but it’s kinda hard to breath; I can’t see through the dust.”

“Don’t do anything, Roy. We’ll find a way to get to you,” promised Sophie before moving on to her other patient. “Hang on, Cam, I’ll free you.” She scrawled to her brother on all fours, and began removing the rocks pinning him down. The stones she could not lift, she rolled, hoping not to exacerbate his wounds. “There, it’s done,” she announced, now flapping her arms to chase away the remaining mist. “How are your legs?”

“Feeling in my right leg is coming back,” said a relieved Cameron. “The left one hurts right below the knee.”

Placing her hand over the designated area, Sophie applied pressure. “Does that hurt more?”

“Only slightly,” replied Cameron.

“You have a partial fracture,” concluded Sophie. Flashlight in hand, she looked around for the blue cloth, finding it among the rubble, and tied it around Cameron’s leg as tightly as she could. “Can you get up?”

“No problem,” bravely said Cameron as he grabbed on to his sister, using her as a crutch. “There! Straight as an arrow.” Spotting the handle of the shovel protruding from the debris, he had Sophie retrieve it—it would make a fine crutch, far more robust than his sister’s delicate frame.

As the haze finally dissipated, Cameron and Sophie noticed that the light emanating from the mine entrance had grown faint. Half of the main passage way was congested; only the top half was clear, providing enough space for escape. The immediate area around the stone wall had resisted mostly, having being reinforced by additional wooden beams that extended over the vertical shaft, no doubt to prevent rock falls into the shaft. The stone wall, however, had swayed and foundered, creating a large opening in the left side of the wall.

“Bingo!” hollered Cameron, thanking Saint Christopher, the patron saint of good luck. “We’re coming through, Roy. You’re safe now.”

“Safe,” thought Sophie, fully recognizing that if the bomb had detonated where it had been originally placed, the whole mine would have completely caved-in—and no one would have been discharged from an early demise.

They entered a chamber twelve feet wide by twenty-two feet deep. The first thing they spotted was the freckled face of a nine year-old boy. “Hi!” he said bashfully and nervously, holding a Batman comic book. “I’m not that afraid of explosions, you know. My father lets me light up the fireworks every fourth of July.”

“You’re a courageous boy, Roy,” said Sophie, noting a dozen or so lit candles spread over a five feet radius in the center of the chamber. “So, this is where you hide...and read?”

“Yes, it’s *my* place, and nobody knows about it...except you and the mean man.” Roy ran to the lit area. “Do you want to see my collection? I have Superman, Spiderman, Iron Man, and my favorite: the X-Men.”

“Really, my son loves the X-Men too,” said Sophie. “In fact, he says he’s a real X-Man, with powers and all.”

“I wish I had powers,” admitted Roy. “I could have fought the mean man. I bet he was as mean as Mister Hyde.”

“Mister Hyde?” wondered Cameron. “As in Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde?” He was surprised a boy so young would know of the 19th century tale.

“I’ll show you,” gleefully said Roy, running to the back of the tenebrous chamber, and returning with a hand-written manuscript. The cover page read: Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; First Draft; August 1885; Robert Louis Stevenson.

“Good Lord!” exclaimed a stupefied Cameron as he riffled through the document. “This is the first version of the story, the one the author presumably burned.”

“There are more stories,” revealed Roy, “but they’re either too complicated or in a language I don’t understand.”

The injured Cameron lurched towards the back, haphazardly sweeping the zone with his flashlight, its light first coming into contact with a perfectly stacked load of rectangular items enclosed in individual burlap bags marked *Ernst Udet*. “It’s damn solid,” he said, tapping one of the bags. Sitting on the pile, he removed one of the items from its bag. “Gold! 400 troy-ounce gold bars! There must be over a hundred bars, worth about \$50 million.”

“Udet’s hidden stash.” Sophie passed her fingers over the bar. “Talk about dumb luck.”

Scanning the area further, Cameron came upon what appeared to be paintings wrapped in wax paper. He tore the paper off the closest one. “I must be dreaming; *The Medusa* by Da Vinci.” Agitated and aroused, he ripped the paper off another one. “*The Poet’s Garden* by Van Gogh.” And another one. “*Portrait of a Young Man* by Raphael.”

“All right, Mister Art critic, I get the *picture*,” yammered Sophie, thinking how clever and witty she was. “Can we please get the boy out of here.” She was also eager to find out if the other teams had spotted or captured the killer.

“Roy, show me the stories, now!” Cameron, giddy as a drunk coming upon his next drink, was deaf to his sister’s plea. And Roy was more than happy to oblige; he had found someone—an adult no less—who was not only agreeable to his juvenile secretiveness, but also impressed by *his* treasure trove, *his* cavern of Ali Baba. This more than offset the adversities of moments past.

“Open Sesame,” exclaimed Roy in delight, handing Cameron an 18-inch stack of papers. No password was necessary to enjoy his fortune.

“*Ur-Hamlet* by Thomas Kyd,” announced Cameron; “it’s an earlier version of the play *Hamlet* predating William Shakespeare’s version. *Le*

*Fagotier* by Molière. And the cantata *Per la ricuperata salute di Ophelia* by Mozart and Salieri.”

“Cameron!” wailed an irate Sophie. “Let’s go! We’ll contact FBI headquarters to impound all this stuff.”

Just as Cameron was finally about to comply, he met with a manuscript whose existence was unknown even to the most invested and most fervent historians, antiquarians and archeologists: the missing *quatrains* of Nostradamus.

Born in December of 1503, in France, Michel de Nostredame grew up to become a notorious prophet and visionary known to this day as Nostradamus.

He wrote a book of one thousand mainly French quatrains (four-line poems), grouped into ten sets of 100 called *Centuries*, constituting the largely undated prophecies responsible for his fame. Feeling vulnerable to opposition on religious grounds, he devised a method of obscuring his meaning by using *virgilianized* syntax, word games and a mixture of other languages such as Greek, Italian, Latin, and Provençal. For technical reasons connected with their publication in three installments, the last fifty-eight quatrains of the seventh Century had not survived into any extant edition.

“Ten,” counted Cameron, turning the page. “Twenty,” counting and turning again. “Thirty...Forty...Fifty...Sixty...Seventy...Eighty...Ninety...and One Hundred. They’re all here. The missing fifty-eight quatrains are included. I have a *complete* set of the seventh Century.” Cameron vaguely recalled the quatrains, having reviewed some of them, interpreted them and written about them, as the yield of a high school assignment. His teacher hadn’t been at all pleased by the poor quality of the work, or by his choice, given the macabre nature of Nostradamus’ masterpiece, and had given him a ‘C’. In truth, his amateur fortune teller of a mother had chosen the subject matter for him, and he resented that.

Flipping back the pages, he arrested his heed on quatrain forty-three, the first of the missing quatrains, and read:

(translated from the original French version)

43

*He shall be born of humanity and inhumanity;  
Cast into a well only to be risen from a well;  
He shall prosper among the innocent and the oblivious;  
And the people of the New Land shall call the Evil friend.*

Deeply disturbed, Cameron read the next few quatrains:

44

*Begotten by the Son of Mohammed and Daughter of the  
Dragon;  
He shall become the dark destroyer of all, The One King;  
Mabus will die by the sword and resurrect onto himself;  
A thousand times more powerful, he shall raise hatred and  
virulence.*

45

*The well from which he sprung shall be filled with human  
darkness;  
As those who seek the mark of Mabus shall be seared by it;  
The souls driven by deception shall plunge into the pits of  
perdition;  
And the bloody war of seven and twenty years on Earth  
shall carry through into the Heavens.*

“Let’s get a move on!” yelled Sophie, interrupting Cameron’s reading.

“Right, right,” said a troubled Cameron as he rolled up the document and shoved it in his vest pocket. Noting his sister’s expression of disapproval, he assured her, “I’ll return it in a few days, swear to God.”

“*Cast into a well only to be risen from a well.*” Cameron kept repeating the line in his mind, terribly disconcerted by it. He was equally unsettled by the phrase: “*The One King,*” although he didn’t quite know why. In French, it read: “*Le Roi Unique,*” which he suddenly realized wasn’t the true source of his concern—it was *his* English translation of it that bothered him.

“The One King,” he whispered to himself as Sophie picked up Roy and headed for the opening in the stone wall. “The One King; The One King,” he kept on obsessively. Then, it hit him; he pronounced it differently. “TheOn

e King. Theon e King. Theon E. King. Theon Ethan King,” expanding on the middle initial. “King,” he muttered anxiously. “King, King...*Rex!*” It occurred to him that *Rex* was the Latin translation for King. “Theon Ethan Rex! That’s it. THEON ETHAN REX!” His son.

Cameron was shocked by the parallel. “Theon Ethan Rex: The One King.” Was this the product of pure coincidence or of purposeful design?

## CHAPTER 46

*Present day; France.*

**The *Musée du Louvre*** is one of the world's largest museums, the most visited art museum in the world and a historic monument. A central landmark of Paris, it is housed in the Louvre Palace, and is located on the Right Bank of the Seine in the 1st arrondissement (district). Nearly 35,000 objects from prehistory to the 19th century are exhibited over an area of 652,300 square feet.

"The museum was built in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century," Gaston Sinclair informed his adopted grandson, Theon. "It was a fortress then."

"It's a pretty big place, Pappy," realized Theon after visiting most of the exhibition rooms and galleries.

"Yes, it is," agreed Gaston, whose daughter, Sarah, was on the phone and lagging behind. "Hurry up, Sarah. You're going to miss the best part."

Gaston and Theon entered the *Salle des États* where Da Vinci's masterpiece, *Mona Lisa*, hung alone on the back wall, behind non-reflective, unbreakable glass to protect it from climatic changes, camera flashes and willful damage.



"Mother wants you to buy bread for supper tonight," said Sarah after hurrying her pace and joining her party. "She'll be making Coq-au-Vin."

“Excellent choice,” shouted a very old man wearing an impeccable suit and tie, standing a few feet away. “But make sure you use *Burgundy* wine, and just a bit of crushed garlic,” he warned candidly as he extended his hand and shook Gaston’s. “I am Doctor Didier Dresdner, General-Administrator of Le Musée du Louvre.”

“Gaston Sinclair,” replied a surprised Gaston. “This is Sarah, my daughter, and Theon, my grandson. To what do we owe the honor of your interpellation?”

“Oh, for no grandiose reason,” said the jolly old man, “if only to bask in the enthusiasm of young people who’ve embarked on an exploration of the wonderful world of Art.”

Rubbing Theon’s hair briskly, Dresdner leaned downwards. “What do you think of that painting?” he asked, pointing at the Mona Lisa.

“She smiles just like mom,” thought Theon, who moved closer to the painting, wanting to slip under the rope preventing visitors from touching the glass.

“Theon!” roared his mother. “Keep your place.” Theon shot a look at her that pleaded leniency.

“Quite understandable for a boy on such a noble quest,” noted Dresdner, who joined Theon’s side. “The lady’s name is Mona Lisa,” he told Theon; “and I think she has a pretty smile and pretty eyes.”

*Mona Lisa* (also known as *La Gioconda* or *La Joconde*) was a portrait by the Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci. It was a painting in oil on a poplar panel, completed circa 1503–1519.

The painting was a half-length portrait depicting a seated woman, whose facial expression had been frequently described as enigmatic. The ambiguity of the subject’s expression, the monumentality of the composition, and the subtle modeling of forms and atmospheric illusionism were novel qualities that had contributed to the continuing fascination and study of the work.

Most scholars believed *Mona Lisa* was named for Lisa del Giocondo, a member of the Gherardini family of Florence and Tuscany, and the wife of wealthy Florentine silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo. The painting had been commissioned for their new home and to celebrate the birth of their second son, Andrea.

Over the years, there have been several alternative views. Some scholars have argued that Lisa del Giocondo was the subject of a different portrait, identifying at least four other paintings as the *Mona Lisa* referred to by Vasari. Sigmund Freud believed that the famous half-smile was a recovered memory of Leonardo’s mother. Other suggestions have been Isabella of Naples, Ce-

ilia Gallerani, Costanza d'Avalos, Duchess of Francavilla, Isabella d'Este, Pacifica Brandano, Isabela Gualanda, Caterina Sforza, and Leonardo himself.

"You know, Theon, nobody knows for sure who Mona Lisa really was," Dresdner whispered to Theon. "But I think she was a *mother*, at the very least—a young mother in her mid-twenties."

Theon stared at the painting for evidence of motherhood, but nothing about it testified to it, except for the smile. With his finger in the air, he traced her smile, going back and forth. "She *was* a mother," he finally concluded. "And she was thirty-three in this painting."

Dresdner grinned with indulgence. "Jesus Christ died at the age of thirty-three, I'll concede that, but this is not a painting of Jesus Christ. My dear boy, this is a painting of a woman." Granted, Mona Lisa's beauty was strangely bewitching and unconventional by most standards, but she could hardly be mistaken for a man.

"I know that," said a vexed Theon, now tracing the shape of eyebrows, which were missing from the painting.

*Mona Lisa* had no clearly visible eyebrows or eyelashes. Some researchers claimed that it was common at that time for genteel women to pluck these hairs, as they were considered unsightly.

"You must be confused by the absent eyebrows and eyelashes," surmised Dresdner. "Ladies used to remove them a long time ago, to look...*younger*." Dresdner suddenly and unexpectedly found himself reconsidering the age of the Mona Lisa. "You're a very perceptive boy. Your *growing* reputation precedes you."

"What do mean by that?" interjected Sarah, who had approached to fetch her child.

"Nothing at all," reassured Dresdner. "Just the ramblings of an old codger who appreciates our youngsters' great potential. I'll see you around, Theon," tapping the boy on the shoulder.

"Come on, honey; Mammy is eager to feed us—she's even made your favorite dessert: cream puffs with dark chocolate." Sarah pulled him by the arm, but could not budge him. She pulled harder, but even then Theon remained inexorably anchored in place.

"Theon, I order you to come with me...or else," menaced Sarah, but no physical might would remove him, and no threat, move him. He was completely intractable.

Gaston saw this and became upset. "Now, you listen to your mother," he loudly barked, firmly clamping his hands onto Theon's shoulders, inadvertently hurting him. Theon's animal instinct immediately galvanized into action, and before Gaston could dispense any degree of patriarchal dominion,

a powerful invisible force struck him and threw him ten feet back onto the marble floor.

At the same instant, the protective glass cracked into thousands of pieces, and plunged to the floor. For the first time ever, the alarm system went off, and armed guards soon followed, aiming their guns at Sarah and Theon. "Watch your boy," screamed Dresdner, who rushed towards the guards.

"Lower your weapons," he commanded. "Do it now!"

"But sir...the paint...the painting," stammered the closest guard.

"It's an accident," Dresdner clamored. "Now lower your guns." He ran to Gaston, who was dazed, and bled from the back of the head, but was conscious. "And call an ambulance."

Gently taking her son's hand, Sarah softly pleaded with him. "Theon, darling, it's mom." His eyes were cold and blank. "I don't know where you are, but come back to me. Come back to mommy."

Since Theon's last visit at their neighbor Amadeo's house, Theon had been exhibiting early symptoms of Autism. She knew in her heart it was not autism, but rather something related to the origins of his *unique* abilities, recently unleashed, intentionally or not, after years of relative tranquility.

"I beg of you, Theon, come back to mommy." Sarah began stroking his arm. "Feel my hand, muffins; it's mommy, it's mommy...it's *mommy*."

Theon's vacant expression suddenly became vibrant and agitated. "They're hurting us, mom," he said with a voice trembling with profound apprehension. "You're hurt, mom, oh no, you're hurt!" He grabbed his mother's face with both hands and frantically probed it, passing his fingers over her frontal hair, her eyebrows, and her eyelashes. "They burnt your face, mom; they burnt it."

"Mommy's fine; mommy's okay," she assured him, wiping her tears and putting on a brave smile. "Look! Mommy has all her hair, her eyebrows, and her eyelashes."

Theon appeared totally confused. "They were gone. The fireballs burnt them off."

"He's referring to the Mona Lisa painting," explained Dresdner, who had returned to their side. "*Receded* hair line; *no* facial hair."

"Of course; where is my head?" Sarah pointed at the painting. "You were thinking about her, honey. Not me, not your mommy." Theon was now quite alert and aware of his surroundings, albeit still befogged with ominous images, which were dissipating only too slowly.

"Your father is fine, by the way," informed Dresdner. "Nothing a few suture points won't fix."

“Dad!” cried out Sarah, who, saddled with a crisis of her own, had forgotten about him. “Please watch my son for a moment, while I tend to my father.”

“You’re a remarkable boy, Theon,” he complimented the boy as he surveyed the pile of *unbreakable* glass at the foot of the painting. “Truly remarkable—in every sense of the word.”

“So *was* my mother,” Theon replied in odd impromptu fashion, looking at the Mona Lisa, and then at Dresdner.

“You mean: so *is* your mother?” corrected Dresdner.

“That’s what I said,” insisted Theon, who easily escaped the old man’s care and ran to Sarah and Gaston.

Dresdner watched the child embrace his grandfather. He was obviously oblivious of his role in Gaston’s injuries. But of all things transpiring today, here in this timeless room, “how many of them had truly remained oblivious to this remarkable boy?” wondered Dresdner. Perhaps some answers were on the way—he was certain of that.

## CHAPTER 52

“**Heaven can wait,**” said Dresdner. “There is still much work to do on Earth. Normand!”

“Yes Doctor.” Normand raced from the kitchen, where he had been washing the dirty fruit-plates. “We’re out of wine, sir.”

Dresdner glared at him. “Are you stupid on purpose?”

“Only slow...or so my mother says. The remaining items, of course.” He raced back to the kitchen and returned with a book and three items wrapped in wax paper, placing them one next to the other, on a long bench pressed against the wall, a few feet away from the table. “Ready, Doctor,” depositing the book on the table.

“Hand me the item labeled *DEMON KISS*.” Dresdner unwrapped the item, revealing an oil painting 18” by 32”, depicting a demon embracing a woman.



“Just like the coded Vitruvian Man sketch, this painting, and the other two items on the bench, were also part of Colonel General Ernst Udet’s hidden cache of stolen treasures.”

“Is it Da Vinci’s work?” asked Dumont. It seemed like a logical assumption to him since the Vitruvian Man was part of the lot.

“My appraisal of it confirms it is.” Dresdner opened the book before him to page 383, and read: *‘And they came, demons all, seeking the traitor. I cherished her more deeply than any other; she had beguiled me. The first demon embraced her naked soul, bestowing upon her the kiss of death; she would not be forgiven for her trespass against the Dark Lord. And our flight was barren of prosperity. She died in the burning light. I shall pursue her anew in the Kingdom of Heaven.’* This is a text from a copy of *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, published by Dover Publications. It references a painting, created in 1518—a year before his death, that was never found—until today.”

Dumont found the text familiar. “It does coincide with an anecdote I heard during my monitoring duties. It spoke of an assault on Da Vinci and a young woman he was sheltering, by demons carrying tridents that shot lightning bolts.” Dumont got closer to the painting. “What’s that symbol on the demon’s head...or helmet?”

The resourceful Dresdner screamed out, “Normand! Magnifying Glass!”

Dumont probed it closely. “That’s what I thought. It’s the same symbol as the one on the blue satin scarf the serial child killer always leaves behind; and it’s the symbol the child saw on the demons’ helmets, while under hypnosis.”

Dresdner thought about it. “It could be that the biblical mother the child saw during hypnosis is *also* the woman Da Vinci sheltered; which means the demons who once guarded her and her child ended up hunting her down and killing her.”

“A 2,000 year-old woman reappearing 1,500 years later as Da Vinci’s girlfriend,” said a clueless Dumont. “I’d love to have her genes.”

“The plot thickens, my friends.” Dresdner ordered Normand to hand him the item labeled *TLS-version one*, before tearing the paper off of it. “You all recognize the painting? It’s a 32” by 17” version of the famous mural painting *The Last Supper*.”

*The Last Supper (L’Ultima Cena)* was a 15th century mural painting created by Leonardo Da Vinci for his patron Duke Ludovico Sforza and his duchess Beatrice d’Este. It represented the scene of The Last Supper from the final days of Jesus as it was told in the Gospel of John 13:21, when Jesus announced that one of his Apostles would betray him.



*The Last Supper* measured 29 feet by 15 feet and covered an end wall of the dining hall at the monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Italy. Leonardo began work on *The Last Supper* in 1495 and completed it in 1498.

“There’s something *off* about the painting,” noticed Nadeau. “John the Apostle, allegedly at Jesus’ immediate right is different—manlier somehow.”

Dresdner flipped through the pages of his book and placed it flatly in front of Nadeau, displaying a two-page spread of a photography of the mural painting. “Now, you should be able to compare.”

“They’re not the same!” shouted Nadeau in dismay. “Are you sure *this* oil painting was produced by Da Vinci?”

“There is absolutely *no* doubt,” replied Dresdner. “In fact, I would submit the painting was created and *used* as a *template* for the mural painting, and that the mural was subsequently modified by Da Vinci, following the death of his mysterious consort, in 1518. Gentlemen, the person on Jesus’ right could be *that* woman—the woman who stole his heart.”

“Da Vinci chose to include *that* woman in that *specific* mural painting—and specifically *next* to Jesus—for a reason,” conjectured Nadeau.

“And that would be?” queried Dumont.

Nadeau gawked at the men, one after the other, expecting them to take cognizance of his long-suppressed epiphany. The men remained cautious. “Do we finally dare entertain certainty rather than possibility?” he challenged them, his own heart beating faster than an army drum roll.

Dresdner smiled like a child in a candy store. He knew what Nadeau was thinking. “Go ahead, Cardinal, say it.”

Doctor Lefoux whispered to Blanchard, “I was right. You all challenged *my* proof, but *I* was right.”

Nadeau grabbed his head with both hands. “The woman next to Jesus *is* Maria Magdalena.”

## CHAPTER 53

**Dresdner placed his hand over Nadeau's** trembling one. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. *Certainty* is quite a big word. Let us simply replace possibility with probability. The woman next to Jesus is *probably* Maria Magdalena."

Some writers and historians have indeed identified the person to Jesus' right not with the Apostle John, but with Maria Magdalena. Furthermore, they pointed out that the absence of a chalice in Leonardo's painting meant Leonardo somehow knew that Maria Magdalena was the actual *Holy Grail* and the bearer of Jesus' blood. They went on to explain that this idea was supported by the shape of the letter "V" that was formed by the bodily positions of Jesus and Maria, "V" being the symbol for the *sacred feminine*, a concept that assumed women, through the ability to bear children, were more sacred in God's eyes than men. The absence of the Apostle John in the painting was explained by knowing that John was also referred to as the *Disciple Jesus loved*, a code for Maria Magdalena.

"So, it seems we have many possible scenarios," surmised Dumont. "The woman in the painting may or may not be Maria Magdalena; may or may not be Da Vinci's girlfriend; may or may not be the woman the child saw during hypnosis. She may well be all these things, or she may be *none* of these things."

"In identifying this woman, I count eight possible scenarios," interjected Ramsay.

"When interpreting the portrait of history, nothing is black or white; just countless brushstrokes of shades of gray." Dresdner screamed once again. "Normand!" Let's move on. Get the last one, and take the paper off, I'm tired."

"Yes, Doctor." Normand handed him the last item on the bench, after quickly ripping the paper off and revealing yet another version of The Last Supper—this one measuring 19" by 10", and enclosed in a protective wood and glass casing.

“I believe this painting was created as Da Vinci drew nearer and nearer to death,” contended Dresdner, who gently set it down on the table.

“It’s identical to the mural painting,” noted Nadeau after meticulously examining it through the glass panel, which pressed against the canvas.

“Visually it is,” said Dresdner, “but technically it is not. Normand!” he screamed for the last time. He was going to miss hounding his half-witted great-grandson-in-law. “Bring me the board.”

Normand scampered into the kitchen yet again and came back with a giant cardboard, about 6 feet by 3 feet, placing it upright on the bench.

“This is a blow-up of the painting I used to analyze its details and intricacies,” informed Dresdner. “To verify authenticity—or forgery—and to detect anomalies, we divided the painting into 2.5” by 2.5” sections. Each brushstroke within each section was compared to a computer model devised from scans of twenty-two unquestionably authentic Da Vinci works—a training database, if you will, for Da Vinci’s unique style. The strokes were examined based on their length and steadiness.”

“Looks all the same style to me,” admitted Dumont, disappointed his keen FBI eye couldn’t detect any incongruities.

“Look at the sections enclosing the woman’s upper body,” suggested Dresdner to Dumont.

“I see what you mean,” replied Dumont. “There are a lot more cracks and creases in that area than anywhere else on the painting. Some of it almost seems to be peeling off.”

“That’s because the area in question was painted with oil, then covered over with an acrylic resin,” pointed out Dresdner; “two very different types of paint. The vehicle and binder of oil paints is linseed oil, whereas water serves as the vehicle for a suspension of acrylic polymer that is the binder in acrylic paint. That’s why oil paint is said to be “oil-based”, while acrylic paint is “water-based””.

“So what?” Dumont didn’t understand the issue; neither did the other men.

Dresdner was patient. “Oil paint takes a long time to dry, while acrylic paint dries very rapidly. In fact, an oil painting takes over 9 months to dry, and even then, there is still moisture trapped within the paint. So, applying acrylic paint over dried oil paint—even after years of dryness—would eventually cause the acrylic paint to crack and peel. And, while applying several layers of varnish might retard the degradation, as was the case here, it would not stop it.”

“That sounds like a rookie mistake, especially for someone as accomplished as Da Vinci,” remarked Dumont.

“He couldn’t have applied the acrylic paint,” announced Dresdner, “since I suspect he was dead at the time. And, had he been alive, he would never have allowed anyone to defile one of his works so grotesquely.”

Dumont took a second look at the blow-up of the area painted with acrylic paint. “So, who could have done it?”

“His favorite pupil, *Francesco Melzi*, did,” argued Dresdner. “No doubt about it.”

Francesco Melzi was an Italian painter, and favorite assistant and pupil of Da Vinci. The son of a Milanese noble family, Melzi joined the household of Leonardo da Vinci in 1506. Melzi accompanied Leonardo to France in 1517. As a painter, Melzi worked closely with and for Leonardo, and he was quite gifted. In fact, some works which, during the nineteenth century, were attributed to Leonardo were now ascribed to Melzi.

Upon Leonardo’s death, Melzi inherited the artistic and scientific works, manuscripts, and collections of Leonardo, and had henceforth faithfully administered the estate. Melzi wrote to Leonardo’s brothers to notify them of his death, and in the letter, he described Leonardo’s love for his pupils as *sviscerato e ardentissimo amore, a selfless and incandescent love*.

Dresdner placed his finger on one of the acrylic-painted squares. “Upon close inspection, you’ll notice that the brushstrokes are longer and steadier than Da Vinci’s. They *perfectly* match Melzi’s style.”

“Why would Melzi, favored by Da Vinci above all others, do this?” queried Dumont.

“To protect Da Vinci’s shining reputation and legacy from secular controversy and heresy,” retorted Dresdner. “There is something behind the acrylic paint that is so contentious Melzi felt compelled to conceal it.”

“Why not have used oil paint instead?” wondered Dumont. “That way the concealment would be permanent.”

Dresdner ruminated upon it. “I believe Melzi thought that there would come a day, centuries later, when people would tolerate, if not embrace, the notion hidden behind the patch of acrylic paint. He therefore wanted the patch to be temporary and removable.”

“*C’est de la merde, votre bande,*” suddenly said an uncharacteristically vulgar Normand as he walked to the main window next to the front door, and lit up a cigarette.

“Our gang is bullshit?” shouted Nadeau. “One more insult like that and your probationary period with the organization will end badly.” Nadeau felt abashed at his secretary’s unexpected boorish behavior.

“You think this is wrongful conduct?” said Normand in a spiteful tone. “This is a trifle compared to murder.”

Nadeau's choler turned to consternation. "What in heavens has gotten into you? And what are you talking about?"

"I killed your previous secretary—your dear nephew," stoically confessed Normand. "Since I was next in line for the secretary job, it seemed like the most expeditious way of infiltrating your band of dissident renegades."

Nadeau was thunderstruck. "Who the hell do you work for? Tell me!"

"*Non nobis Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam (Not to us Lord, not to us, but to Your Name give the glory),*" clamored Normand as he pulled out a *Mateba Autorevolver*.

"The pledge of the *Knights Templar!*" Nadeau's face turned white when he heard the motto, and whiter when he saw the gun.

The *Knights Templar*, or the *Order of the Temple (Ordre du Temple or Templiers)* were among the most famous of the Western Christian military orders.

Officially endorsed by the Catholic Church around 1129, the Order became a favored charity throughout Christendom, and grew rapidly in membership and power. Templar Knights, in their distinctive white mantles with a red cross, were among the most skilled fighting units of the Crusades—a series of religiously sanctioned military campaigns, called by the Pope and the Church of Rome, whose main goal was the restoration of Christian control over the Holy Land.

The Order was later suppressed by the same Church of Rome it protected, under the hands of a greedy French King, Philip IV, controlling a weak French Pope, Clement V.

"Take your gun out of its holster and throw it over here," Normand commanded Dumont, who failed to comply deliberately. "Do it now, FBI man, or I kill Nadeau."

Dumont finally obeyed. He crouched and slid his weapon towards Normand, who shoved in the back of his pants.

"Thank you, Dumont," wept Nadeau, scared out of his wits. "We're all pacifists," he told Normand. "No one here is a danger to—"

A bullet suddenly sped through the air, ending its course in Nadeau's parietal lobe. The Cardinal fell off his chair and slumped onto the floor, quite dead. The Circle of the Eight—now down to seven—was frozen with fear, with the exception of Blanchard, who appeared ready to pounce on the shooter.

"You fucker!" cried out Dumont, who took a few steps towards Normand.

"Make my day," replied Normand, directing his gun at Dumont. "I never had myself an FBI man before; it's tempting."

“*Eight* men against one,” observed Dumont. “Clearly, we have the advantage. You might get one more of us, or maybe two, but we *will* kill you.”

“I suppose I need to even the odds a little bit,” contemplated Normand, who threw the remainder of his cigarette on the floor, raised his left hand at eye level, and clenched his fist. Almost instantly two men emerged from the darkness outside, and barged in the cabin, one through the front door, the other through the back door. “The cavalry always arrives in the nick of time.”

The two men were wearing Italian army camouflage suit fatigues, covered in green and brown patches, and emblazoned on the right shoulder with a white circular patch adorned with a red cross, the crest of the Templar Knights. They both wielded deadly FN-P90 submachine guns—and they looked *serious*.

## CHAPTER 54

**Dumont remained still, studying the type** of weapon the soldiers carried. “Impressive, and an expensive arsenal for an underground Holy militia. I suppose the Pope let you dip into the Vatican coffers.”

Normand shrugged his shoulders playfully, avoiding an answer.

Cardinal Romeo, however, mustered the courage to provide one. “Many Popes of yesteryears supported the cause of the Knights Templar; and the soldiers supported their reigns with honor. A Templar Knight is truly a fearless knight, and secure on every side, his soul protected by the armor of faith, and his body by the armor of steel. He is thus doubly armed, and need fear neither demons nor men. If a *true* Templar ever lived today, it would not be you.” Romeo spat on the floor in disgust.

“Oh, but we are Templars,” rebutted Normand; “and killing heretics is our most sacred duty—a duty sanctioned by a very resolute *Pope*. You should be honored; you’re at the top of his hit list.”

“Pope Benvenuto may often be an inflexible man, but he is no murderer,” insisted Romeo.

“All Nazis are murderers, in one way or another,” said Normand. “Don’t be fooled by the white skullcap and the nice dress; the killer instinct is very much there.”

Pope Benvenuto was German and his real name was *Carsten Maximilian Reiniger*. As a boy subjected to the demands of the Nazi regime, he attended the elementary school in *Aschau am Inn* for several years. Following his 14th birthday in 1941, Reiniger was conscripted into the Hitler Youth. And in 1943, he was drafted into the German anti-aircraft corps as *Luftwaffenhelfer (child soldier)*, and then trained in the German infantry.

Not many people knew of these events, but Normand did—and it was only the tip of the iceberg. He knew how *deep* the iceberg really went.

Normand, quite full of himself, rotated his aim 45 degrees away from Dumont, now pointing his revolver at Dresdner. "Tell Romeo, and the others, what you know about Reiniger. I'll kill you if you don't."

"You'll kill me no matter what," replied Dresdner.

Normand grinned. "I'll kill somebody else if you don't loosen those lips."

Dresdner acquiesced and confessed to a ghastly story. "Reiniger and I spent three months in an American POW camp in 1945. I was twenty-two and he was only eighteen, and looked towards me for guidance and protection. We were the youngest of the camp. One night, while we sat on the balcony of our barrack, an American soldier we had befriended gave us a bottle of moonshine. He told us to drink it quickly since curfew was almost upon us.

"In no time, we became heavily inebriated. Reiniger then began telling me of his tour of duty in the Hitler Youth. As part of his initiation, he had to prove his devotion by ending an unworthy life. While he refused to kill of his own hands, he did divulge the place where one of his cousins, a fourteen-year-old boy with Down syndrome, was being hid. The boy was found and was taken away by the Nazis and killed as part of the *Aktion T4* campaign of *Nazi eugenics*."

Nazi eugenics were Nazi Germany's racially-based social policies placing the improvement of the Aryan race through eugenics at the center of its concerns. Those humans the Nazis identified as *life unworthy of life* (*Lebensunwertes Leben*) included criminals, degenerates, dissidents, the feeble-minded, homosexuals, the insane and the weak, all marked for elimination from the chain of heredity. More than 400,000 people were sterilized against their will, while 70,000 more were killed under Action T4, a *euthanasia* program.

"How can you say such things about the Pope?" shouted Romeo to Dresdner. "We may not agree with him on several matters, but that is no reason to sully his good name."

Normand waved his gun up and down as a gesture to continue the damaging account.

Dresdner went on reluctantly. "Reiniger also told me that, as part of his infantry training, he had to practice shooting moving targets. He had just turned eighteen, and his *commandant* informed him that it was time to become a real soldier.

"A Jewish man was ordered to run across the field. The commandant put a gun to Reiniger's head and said he had to choose who would die. Reiniger aimed his firearm and shot the man through the heart. A Jewish

woman and her ten-year old son were then ordered to run across the field as well. He shot her through the neck, and the boy through the head.

“His gruesome tale ended, a smiling Reiniger came to me. He said shooting *sub-humans* was a cathartic experience, an emotional purging of sorts; something he never expected to feel. I was appalled and so angry at the boy-turned-sadist that I never spoke to him again.”

“And there it is,” exclaimed Normand. “Reiniger was never an unenthusiastic member of the Nazi army, and nor did he ever desert back to his family’s home in *Traunstein*, as many would attest. He was as indoctrinated and as conditioned as any other young German soldier. And now, this Nazi rules Christendom. He is a man to be feared and obeyed.”

Dumont appeared unswayed—he had faced far more terrifying men in the line of duty. “What’s your real interest in all of this?” What have these men done to you or the Pope?”

“They offend me and they offend the Pope. As devout Christians, we cannot let them fester and multiply,” retorted Normand. “They threaten the very tenets of our faith.”

“All I see here is a ploy to maintain power,” said Dumont. “Being the instrument of the Church of Rome—the valiant Knights Templar—must be very *lucrative*. What ever happened to the *Templar Oath of Poverty*?”

“Protecting the faith doesn’t come cheap,” laughed Normand, who replaced his revolver in its holster. “Now, enough about my *employer*. Let’s get back to business.” The two armed soldiers moved closer, while the traitor picked up all the copies of the Vitruvian Man document, and walked to the stone fireplace right next to the kitchen area, depositing the stack over a pile of wood, and igniting it with his lighter. “You don’t have to worry about the original document; I’ve taken care of that.”

At the sight of destruction of such paradigm-shifting information, Dresdner lost it and rushed at Normand. “You ignorant fool!” He was immediately pelted by a dozen machine gun bullets, and crashed to the ground.

Normand stared at Dresdner’s prostrate body. “What a shame.” He then pulled out a knife and cut out the canvasses of the *Demon Kiss* and *Last Supper-version one* paintings, throwing them into the burning fireplace.

As Normand crouched before the fireplace, enjoying the heat of the fire, and reveling in his superiority, Dumont noticed the handle of his own gun sticking out of the back of Normand’s pants. He glanced at Blanchard, who gave him a quick nod, hoping the ex-special agent of Interpol was not only signaling his approval to act, but was also indicating he had a

weapon of his own. In a flash, Dumont barreled towards Normand, while the two soldiers instinctively aimed their machine guns at him.

Simultaneously, Blanchard pulled out his weapon and shot six rounds, three at each soldier, emptying his gun. One soldier collapsed and died instantly, a bullet to the head. The other, wounded, fired randomly at the group. Blanchard had just enough time to duck below the table. Romeo and Pubudu were shot dead, while Lefoux and Lapierre were shot to the arm, and Ramsay to the thigh.

Dumont had now tackled Normand to the ground. He grabbed his revolver, twisted his upper body a full 180 degrees, and shot the injured soldier in the head. In that same moment, Normand kicked Dumont off balance, who dropped his gun, and pulled out his own weapon. The men struggled, somehow both getting up. Dumont latched on Normand's gun, and violently pushed his assailant over the table and onto the glass-framed painting, shattering the glass. Both men then rolled over and fell to the floor.

As for Blanchard, he wasted no time. He picked up Dumont's weapon from the ground, and rushed to Dumont's aid. Without hesitation, he pressed the barrel of the gun against Normand's temple and fired. The blood spat over Dumont's face.

"Thanks for the shower," said a groggy Dumont, who clumsily got back up. "What's the damage?"

"Lefoux, Lapierre and Ramsay are the only ones who made it, present law enforcement excepted," replied Blanchard.

Shaken and disoriented, Lefoux, Lapierre and Ramsay wept in relief. The only graphic violence they had ever witnessed before today came from cable television.

"We need to call an ambulance," insisted Dumont.

"No!" sternly replied Blanchard. "I'll take care of everything. As for you, get as far away from this place as you can." He grabbed Dumont by the arm. "This is not finished, not by a long shot."

Dumont headed for the front door and just as he reached the threshold he stopped in his tracks and turned around. "I have to know."

"Go ahead, but be quick about it," said Blanchard as he examined the wounded. "Dresdner was going to do it anyway."

Dumont walked back to the table and pulled the bastardized painting towards him. He removed the larger shards of broken glass, and swept the rest to the side. "*What* are you hiding, mystery girl?" he whispered to himself as he stared at the woman to Jesus' right.

Blanchard handed him Normand's knife. "This should help."

Dumont peeled off two large chunks of acrylic paint, and then began carefully shaving off the rest until he could clearly make out what had been shrouded by myriad brushstrokes of imposturous paint. “Holy Moses!” he suddenly cried out in astonishment.

What he saw, he never would have expected to see in such explicit and manifest fashion: a *baby boy* nestled in the woman’s arms, sucking milk from her breasts.