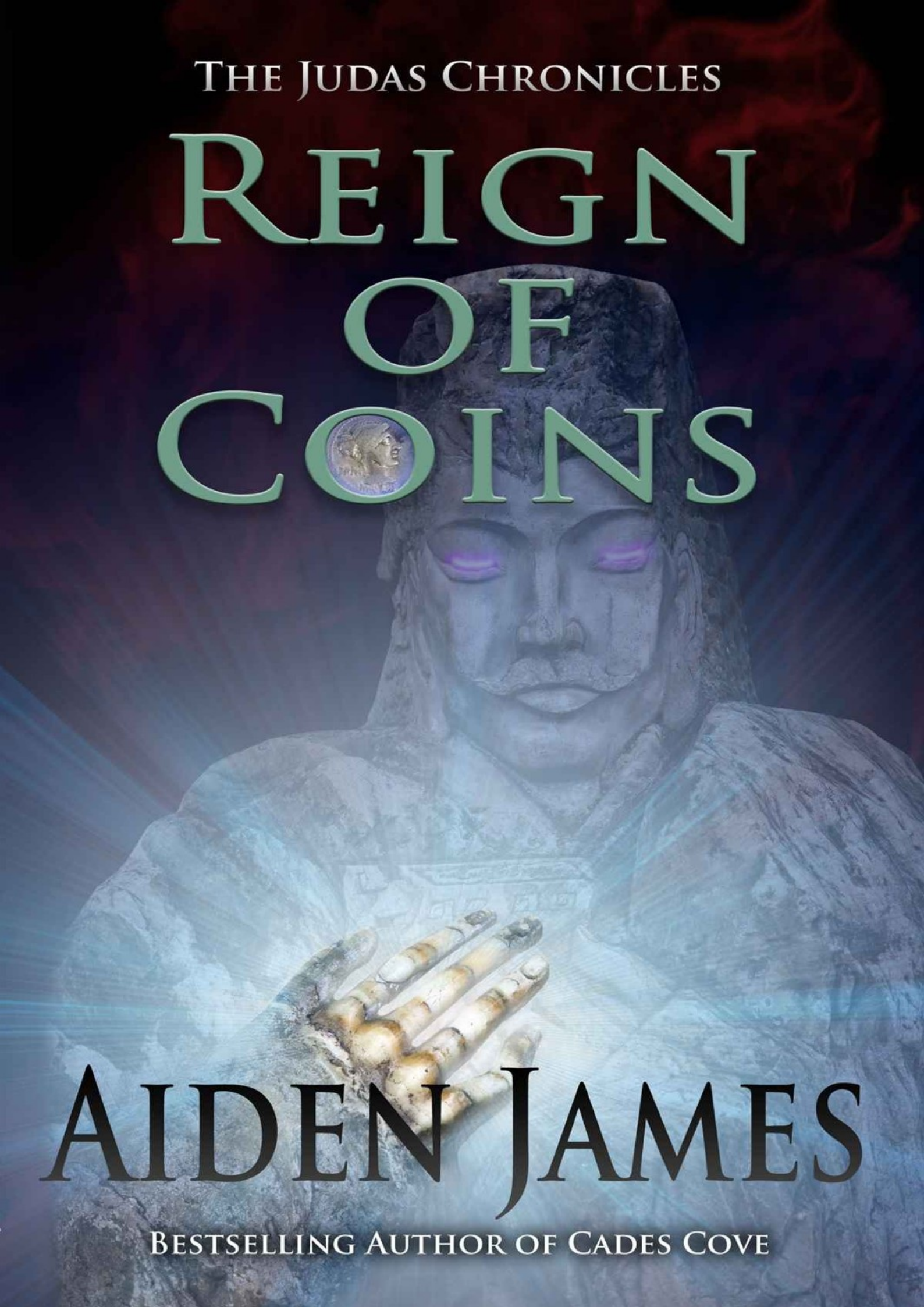
THE JUDAS CHRONICLES

REIGN OF COINS



AIDEN JAMES

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF CADES COVE

Reign of Coins
The Judas Chronicles
Book 2

by

Aiden James

Based on an Original Concept by
J.R. Rain

Acclaim for Aiden James:

"Aiden James has written a deeply psychological, gripping tale that keeps the readers hooked from page one." *Bookfinds review for "The Forgotten Eden"*

"A variety of twists, surprises, and subplots keep the story moving forward at a good pace. My interest was piqued almost immediately and my attention never wavered as I forced my eyes to stay open well into the night. (Sleep is overrated.) Aiden James is a Master Storyteller, whose career is on the rise! Out-freaking-standing-excellent!" *Detra Fitch of Huntress Reviews, for "Plague of Coins"*

"The hook to this excellent suspense thriller is the twists that will keep readers wondering what is going on as nothing is quite what it seems. Adding to the excitement is that the audience will wonder whether the terror is an evil supernatural creature or an amoral human…Aiden James provides a dark thriller that grips fans from the opening." *Harriet KLausner, for "The Forgotten Eden"*

"Aiden James writing style flows very easily and I found that Cades Cove snowballed into

a very gripping tale. Clearly the strengths in the piece were as the spirit's interaction became prevalent with the family…. The Indian lore and ceremonies and the flashbacks to Allie Mae's (earthly) demise were very powerful. I think those aspects separated the work from what we've seen before in horror and ghost tales." *Evelyn Klebert, Author of "A Ghost of a Chance", "Dragonflies", and "An Uneasy Traveler" for "Cades Cove"*

"The intense writing style of Aiden James kept my eyes glued to the story and the pages seemed to fly by at warp speed…. Twists, turns, and surprises pop up at random times to keep the reader off balance. It all blends together to create one of the best stories I have read all year." *Detra Fitch, Huntress Reviews, for "The Devil's Paradise"*

"Aiden James is insanely talented! We are watching a master at work….Ghost stories don't get any better than this." *J.R. Rain, Author of "Moon Dance' and "Vampire Moon" for "The Raven Mocker"*

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Reign of Coins by Aiden James

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Reign of Coins

Chapter 1

I sometimes worry that my quest to reclaim the ransom I was once paid to betray Jesus Christ won't be worth it in the end. After all, recovering twenty-two of the thirty silver shekels has proved to be an often arduous and dangerous avocation. For centuries the stakes only involved me, and I suffered more than a dozen deaths in my efforts to track down each shekel—coins that all carry a terrible curse to anyone foolish enough to fall for their subtle allure. Often my deaths would end up transporting me to someplace new upon this grand planet. Sometimes five minutes later, and other times after years had passed in my absence. Regardless, as a cursed immortal, having to start over again and again has

been more than a tad irritating.

It might seem The Almighty is given to a cruel sense of humor. However, I've come to understand each trial and circumstance is a honing moment for my very soul. It's an old soul, and one that has tried gracefully to carry the considerable penalty dealt for my terrible folly two thousand years ago. Yet, despite my greatest efforts to gain leniency, at the end of the day I remain the greatest villain and most reviled human being ever to walk the earth.

I am Judas Iscariot.

But, please…call me William. William Barrow, and on a mission to find eight more silver shekels, in hopes that possession of all thirty coins will reverse my terrible curse of eternal life on earth.

Until recently, I've enjoyed relative anonymity as William Barrow. A Smithsonian Institute archivist for nearly a dozen years, I recently left the famed institution for reasons I'll soon explain. The New World has been my home for much of the past six hundred years, but it may soon end forever. It began with one particular death in England that transported me to the Appalachian region in the year 1450. The Cherokee called the land at that time *Shaconage*, and were the first to befriend me.

I'd really hate for the love affair with America to end soon.

Due to a certain government agency's refusal to accept my status as a free *civilian*, instead of an indentured servant, I may no longer have a choice. My beloved son, Alistair, and my equally beloved and vulnerable wife, Beatrice, are in grave danger as long as the CIA refuses to accept my warnings about Viktor Kaslow.

This brief overview brings us to the present moment.

"How long is our flight, again?" asked Alistair. He stared absently out the jumbo jet's window. His body grows younger every day, but fatigue from jet lag had set in after a twelve-hour flight from Honolulu to Japan. It could only worsen during our current jaunt from Tokyo to Hong Kong.

"Four hours and twenty-five minutes," I said. "We have roughly three hours to go. You can rest as long as you need when we get to the hotel."

A grunt was his only response. It brought an image to mind of when he was an ornery adolescent in Glasgow. By then, Beatrice had begun to eye me suspiciously. The subtle lines upon my face had yet to change…and never would. Meanwhile, the crow's feet around her eyes were deepening.

"At least we're in first class, and not coach," I teased. "If you'd allow me to pull the blind to cover your window, you might forget we're in perpetual daylight."

"Pops, I know what frigging time it is—probably better than you do!" he said, disdainfully, his Scottish brogue shining through.

"Should I call for the flight attendant? It appears someone's blood sugar is running low."

My grin seemed to infuriate him more. I've never been able to resist a good taunt when

available—a trait that once infuriated Simon, the disciple who became Saint Peter. Alistair's deep brown eyes grew dark, but then his expression softened. He pointed at a petite blonde walking toward us carrying a small iPod.

"It looks like our stewardess is bringing you a small toy, Pops. Perhaps it's something to pacify you and allow me some peace and quiet for awhile."

Touché.

She studied us while wearing a slightly flirtatious look. I've often thought my son bears similarities to Sean Connery, in the later years of the famed Scottish actor's film career. Their eyes twinkle with the same laughter when amused, and their strong brows are identical. They sound alike when they speak, and even their smiles are similar. Until recently the facial lines and white hair thinning along the crown was similar, too. After my son picked up a sack full of crystals from a sacred cavern in Iran last year, he has steadily gotten younger, and by at least a decade since then. A more youthful Connery, perhaps?

As for me, you may have heard I'm forever stuck in my early thirties. I'm blessed with standard Hebrew comeliness, and I've often been told my deep blue eyes reveal the ongoing torment in my soul that somehow enhances my smile. Some might call this sort of thing disarmingly handsome. If so, it seemed to be working right then.

"Mr. Barrow?"

"Yes," we answered in unison.

The flight attendant named Nancy blushed, and moved over to where I sat.

"You must've lost this when you boarded the plane." She handed me the device. A blue Nano-6g, my name was engraved upon the back in my preferred leaf script. I'd never beheld the damned thing before. Someone had left it on the plane prior to when we boarded our flight.

"Well, are you going to just sit there and admire it, without turning it on?"

At least Alistair was smiling again. It used to be an easy sell to convince people unaware of my real identity that he is the *father*, and I'm the *son* in our relationship—the inverted truth. Everyone we know in D.C. still believes our reversed roles, although my son's recent ability to shed years like Nutrisystem pounds has hindered the ruse's effectiveness. His alibis about a new diet routine are losing credibility, especially since his eyes have regained the clarity of youth and his loose skin and muscles have tightened throughout his body. Even his hair is fuller and darker…though I suppose hair transplants and dye could produce similar results.

Alistair will be sixty-two years old in July, less than a month from now, and yet, he bears all the characteristics of a man approaching fifty. Not to mention, the age reversal appears to be picking up steam—enough to where he has taken a one-year hiatus from his professorship at Georgetown to escape growing scrutiny.

Despite hoping for a possible return to his professorship, I believe his teaching days at the esteemed institution have ended forever. Such is the curse of eternal youth that he and our friends Jeremy and Amy Golden Eagle must now endure. Perhaps Beatrice will also enjoy this 'curse' someday, although her youth restoration is progressing much slower.

“Would you rather have the honor?” I reduced my voice to a mere whisper as Nancy sauntered away. “It could be a bomb, you know.”

“Humph! If that’s true, I guess you’ll read about it someday in whatever new place and time you end up in.” His turn to tease.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. “I’ll hold it close, and if it goes ka-boom, it’ll only be me who gets blown up. You can explain why your kid’s no longer on the plane.”

“Very funny, Pops.” He leapt from his seat to take it, and powered it on before he sat down again. “Looks like something’s been preloaded…it’s coming up on the screen.”

He motioned for me to take a look. I casually glanced around, looking for anyone suspicious who might’ve planted the device. Paranoia concerning my former CIA employers is usually well founded.

A familiar face appeared on the iPod’s screen.

“Hello, Willie Boy! I’ll bet you didn’t expect to hear from me so soon, after our…our *dispute* about your active status as a special reserve in our agency….”

Cedric Tomlinson. My long time associate and guardian adviser with the agency, until recently, was putting on the hard sell. I had recently nixed any more obligations to the ‘U.S. of A’, as a civilian no less, in an unpleasant face-to-face with Cedric and Michael Lavoie. They enjoyed a good laugh as I stormed out of Mike’s office, and no doubt didn’t believe me when I shouted, “I quit—*forever!”*

“Let me see that thing,” I said, gently, as a parent ready to pull out a painful splinter from their kid’s finger. Alistair reluctantly handed over the MP3 player, eyeing me warily.

I merely glanced at Cedric’s smug smile while reaching for the vomit bag next to my seat, depositing the device inside. Before Alistair could stop me, I poured the watered-down remains of my son’s gin and tonic into the bag and sealed it, shaking the combo until the sound of Cedric’s muffled voice ceased.

“Why in the hell did you do that?” seethed Alistair, still trying to reach for the bag I kept away from him without rising from my seat. I dare say Chauncey Billups could do no better. “Are you trying to get us killed?!”

“In truth, it’s just the opposite,” I replied. “I told the agency we’re done, as far as helping them with their shit is concerned. They’re not taking Viktor’s presence seriously.”

“You told them about Viktor Kaslow?”

“They already knew about him…remember?”

It annoyed me that I’d have to explain everything to him again, after I mentioned Kaslow’s re-emergence in my world to my boy two weeks earlier. Perhaps I could’ve picked a better time than the evening at Sal’s to bring it up, since he was snuggled close to his young girlfriend, Amy Golden Eagle. I realized now he might not have heard a damned thing I warned him about, even though he had nodded like a bobbing-head doll.

“Remember what? Maybe you thought you said it when in reality you didn’t.”

“Oh, I said it all right, and even Amy agreed the danger was too great for any of us to

stay in association with the CIA," I said, lowering my voice to where it was an undecipherable hiss except to him. "It wasn't just my sighting of the bastard in Caracas, when I completed the last favor for Michael that I'll ever give him. Amy said she saw Kaslow hanging around Jeremy's place one night."

"At his townhouse near downtown?"

"Yes."

He sighed heavily, as if this were an epiphany concerning the vilest human being I've encountered since the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition hunted me relentlessly in the fifteenth century. Meanwhile, I called sweetly for Nancy to come over to us.

"Would you mind disposing this?" I made sure to keep my voice low and sultry. "I apologize, but it seems as if the ham and cheese wrap didn't agree with my stomach."

Alistair watched in horror as I handed her the sealed vomit bag. She hurried off to dispose of it while his worried gaze followed her.

"So, what about Viktor Kaslow?" he asked, weakly.

"Well, aside from coming back from the dead, as all of us already knew, he's been following me since Christmas. He killed James Stewart in Venezuela while I was down there. Michael and Cedric continue to believe it was an accident."

"I heard that James fell off a building." His voice turned solemn, as if reflecting on the one agent he actually liked working with…or used to, anyway.

"That could be true…. But, only if one ignores the fact security cameras caught a blonde man moving to the stairs soon after James went airborne."

"Oh, I see."

No you don't my dear boy. And may you never *see* the terrible wickedness wrought by Viktor's hands.

"Viktor is far worse now than he ever was when mortal," I advised, hoping to make a permanent impact. "He's far stronger, and unlike you, his body is already in the prime of youth again."

"That's not why you are worried like this, though, is it?" Alistair eyed me intently. How I longed for the days when he'd adjust his glasses to better see me. He no longer needs magnification to see my expressions clearly.

"No…no, it isn't."

I hoped a succinct answer would suffice, and we could move on to other things. But, he wasn't ready to let the matter go.

"Do you expect him to show up at the coin exhibition?"

"What, and bid on the Cheung collection?"

"Not necessarily…. But, what if he did?"

"That would be bad," I said, and shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I suddenly worried that hidden ears now listened.

“How so?” Alistair’s question sounded nonchalant, and defied the worry clouding his countenance. “You don’t think he’d attack us in public, do you?”

“It’s hard to say…he might. That’s never been his style, though.” I tried to deliver this with the same nonchalance, and thought about hiding the truth about what I feared most for a while longer.

“Do you think he knows about the coins?”

Bingo…almost, anyway.

“I’d like to think he doesn’t know yet,” I said, feeling the corner I had painted myself into getting smaller and smaller. “However, I’m afraid he knows something about me just as bad.”

I could almost feel my son’s pulse quicken and his own dread constrict around his entire being. He had personal knowledge of Kaslow’s cruelty from his own near-death experience in the Alborz Mountains of Iran last year. As if unable to continue speaking, he nodded for me to go on.

“Viktor Kaslow may not know *who* I am,” I said, making sure my tone was hushed and difficult to decipher by anyone other than him. “However, he certainly knows the *what*. It’s in the way he looked at me in Caracas. Usually it takes centuries for an immortal to recognize another, and that’s because we realize we’ve seen each other before, in eras past…. But, somehow, Kaslow knows he and I are virtually made from the same ilk.”

No other words were necessary. My son nodded thoughtfully and turned his attention out the window. Only this time, he wasn’t looking absently at the cloudbank below. He mumbled something. It took a moment to realize he had uttered his first prayer in my presence in more than fifty years.

Chapter 2

The Royal Garden is a splendid hotel overlooking Victoria Harbour. Whenever possible, I like to treat Alistair to the better accommodations the world has to offer. As for me, when traveling on my own, it really depends. I’ve been fortunate to accumulate enough wealth during the past two millennia to not worry about material needs for the next several centuries. At times, I’ve relished being treated like a Saudi prince, lavished with luxury. Other times, I’ve sought austere solitude in the most hostile locales around the world. Often, these areas are afflicted with extreme poverty.

Only once have I taken such a trip with Alistair. He almost died, and this is not the aforementioned trip to Iran last year. It was in South America, where retrieving a coin involved one of the most ruthless and bloodthirsty cartels. All told, my son has experienced close brushes with death in three of our twelve coin hunting expeditions. His sigh of relief when I revealed our present accommodations, shortly after the plane landed, became a prelude to his approving nod as we stepped into our sixth floor suite at the Royal Garden Hotel in Hong Kong.

“I’m liking it so far, Pops,” he said, smiling broadly after laying his laptop case and suitcase on his bed. “But, your coin had better be here, since you’ve now pissed off the CIA. Someone in the agency is bound to show up soon.”

“It’s here,” I assured him, while gazing through a window with the better view of Kowloon Bay. “And, true, if anyone in Washington has a beef with me, they already know where to find us.” I offered a confident smile as he joined me by the window.

“At least you picked something in the historic district. Perhaps after dinner we can explore the area a little, although I assume the science museum has already closed for the day,” said Alistair. “I meant to check on the hours of operation, including the weekend hours before we left Washington.”

“Are you forgetting we moved up nearly a full day?” I reminded him. “When we left Honolulu early this morning, it was Sunday. Now that we’ve crossed the date line it’s Monday evening. Didn’t you notice the late afternoon hustle and bustle as we drove through downtown?”

He looked mortified, as if this realization had just hit him. I reminded myself that he’d retired from teaching less than three weeks ago. For a career academic, the idea of lost time was akin to coming home and finding their pad burglarized.

“This means our sightseeing will be cut short, since the coin exhibition begins tomorrow morning,” he lamented, moving over to a small refrigerator and grabbing a bottle of water. “I don’t suppose you can press your charms into action, and see if you can purchase the shekel beforehand?”

“What, and watch the price for it sky rocket?”

“Ha! As if the bidding price for the rarest Tyre shekels could ever rise above two grand! Even if it did, I’ve watched you pay millions for some coins.”

“I can’t argue with that,” I chuckled, thinking about those instances. “We’ll have to see how it goes in the morning.”

“Well, that brings up another point,” said Alistair. He moved over to the window and pointed toward the bay. “Not to sound ungrateful, since this is a posh arrangement. But, what motivated you to stay this far away from the Convention and Exhibition Centre? You, of all people, like to be as close as you can be to what you seek, so your senses can hone in on a coin. This is a definite first.”

He was right. I usually hover over the prize I seek like a kingfisher circling around its nest. However, except for one terrible betrayal in the late thirteenth century, I’ve never had to worry about an unexpected attack coming from my blind side until now. It was another

ripple effect from Viktor Kaslow's reemergence in my world.

"If we optimally plan our departure from the hotel tomorrow morning, it'll add at most twenty minutes to our arrival at the convention," I said, for the moment not answering the deeper, implied concern behind his question. "They're expecting a huge crowd, since so many rare coins will be on display. If we leave late, we'll likely get swallowed up by the mob."

"I expect Viktor Kaslow to be somewhere in that crowd, and maybe even a few of Cedric's people," said Alistair. "I'm sure you expect them, too. And, don't forget I've studied your older journals. Your obsession with the *Ala ad-Din* silver shekel has brought you to China many times before, including several trips to Hong Kong over the course of the past four centuries."

I turned away from his probing gaze.

"What makes this one so damned special?" he persisted.

"It's a long story, Ali," I replied, scowling as if my Ala ad-Din obsession was his fault. "One told best if we were at the Martini bar downstairs. I could use a stiff drink."

"Not me," said Alistair. "But I could go for some Huaisang cuisine. The desk clerk gave one hell of an endorsement for Dong Lai Shun."

"The Chinese restaurant on the premises?"

"Yep."

What I needed was quiet ambiance and a drink…or two, and maybe three. Sharing a tale that had only partially made it out of my head during the past millennium was the bigger issue.

"All right," I agreed. "I'm not sure how much I'll reveal, since I have no intention of talking about it until the wee hours. Be prepared to listen closely, as I doubt I'll be willing to share it ever again."

"Just as long as it doesn't turn into a lecture, I'll give you that."

"Good. I'll stick to the important things…such as the coin's lineage and Genghis Khan."

"Genghis Khan? What in the…are you saying you once knew *him?"*

"Yes."

I left him standing near the window with his mouth hanging open in disbelief while I cleaned up. It was the first of many such reactions that night.

* * *

"Okay, Pops…I'm ready to hear your story about Ala ad-Din."

We had just finished an exquisite Shuan Yang Rou dinner at Dong Lai Shun, and were

working on our second bottle of Bordeaux. I suppose many of you would expect a bottle or two of *baijiu*, instead. I deferred to Alistair's preference in hopes it would keep his interruptions to a minimum.

"What do you know about the thirteenth century Shah, Ala ad-Din Muhammad?"

Alistair eyed me curiously after I posed this question. It certainly wasn't how he expected the story to start.

"The one who aspired to be Sultan of Khwarezm, in the early 1200s?"

"Yes, he's the one," I said. "Persia wasn't big enough for him, and my coin's curse fed his insatiable lust for conquest."

I smiled, grateful for his prior knowledge of the Shah. Alistair's expertise as a professor was in Middle Eastern history, but I doubted the Shah's fateful arrogance regarding the Silk Road in the thirteenth century captured his imagination anywhere near how it had fed my irritation when it happened 'real time'.

"So, we're talking about the Shah who was extremely paranoid and whose ambitions defied the diplomacy of Genghis Khan?" He chuckled and paused to sip his wine. "And, here I thought you were going to start things off with a ramble about tracking your coin to the nomadic tribe Mr. Khan hailed from."

"I didn't know him as Temujin, if that's what you're getting at." I shot him a fatherly look. After all, I could just as easily keep him in the dark regarding my role in what went down eight hundred years ago. "I had heard the legend of a nomadic warlord becoming a formidable entity—one powerful enough to overthrow the great Chinese kingdoms of the north."

"That's because he was a master of forced diplomacy." Alistair lifted his glass in mock salute. "Khan kept the bloodshed to a minimum by giving the rulers of each Chinese city and town an opportunity to step aside and let him through. That was before Ala ad-Din Muhammad defied him."

A rush of memories suddenly flooded my awareness, awakened from the deep recesses of my mind. It was more than I expected. I heard the screams of women and children, while the men of Samarkand lost the fight to protect them. All because of one man's foolishness. Shah Ala ad-Din Muhammad had fallen under the influence of one of my blood coins.

Genghis Khan was not a friend, but neither was he my enemy. We met during my last visit to Khwarezm, where I sought to reclaim this particular coin. Ala ad-Din had recently slaughtered Khan's personal Mongolian envoy and executed an imprisoned delegation of the Mongol's ambassadors—crimes he would pay dearly for. The coin enhanced the Shah's wickedness, and I was oh, so close to getting my hands on it. It's bluish glow emanated faintly from inside his heavily guarded personal chambers.

"So, Pops, what does Khan's tiff with Ala ad-Din have to do with the coin we've traveled half the world to find?"

My son's voice snapped me out of my stupor.

“The Shah’s reckless actions were inspired by the coin’s inherent evil,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Those actions inspired a retaliation that undoubtedly was fed by the same wickedness. A plague spread out to the Mongol army from inside Samarkand, and I could feel the change invade them all.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?”

I looked up from my wine glass to see Alistair shaking his head. Without access to the scene playing in my head, the historical annals he had studied painted a much softer scene than the merciless ripping of human flesh I recalled.

“As you stated, Genghis Khan and his Mongol army had always deployed some vestige of diplomacy,” I explained, finding my normal voice. “But, from the day Samarkand fell until the moment his reign ended, his diplomacy was no more—especially against Islamic peoples. The new policy was to slaughter everyone standing in his way—even those who didn’t offer resistance, but were also Muslim.”

“And, you truly believe the untimely fall of the Shah’s burgeoning empire was due to a coin?”

I hate it when Alistair plays the devil’s advocate. He damned well knows this is not only what I think, but is also verifiably true.

“Yes,” I said. “Along with the Shah’s bent toward wickedness. It certainly wasn’t because of evil inherent within Genghis Khan.”

“How so?”

“It was the way Khan looked at me when I was brought before him, an hour or so before he reneged on his amnesty promise for the Shah’s soldiers who had aided in the overthrow of Samarkand,” I explained. “I saw kindness in his face, which I didn’t expect to see, based on the ferociousness of his army of warriors.”

“Did you consider he might have you killed with the rest of the city’s populace?”

“I was prepared for it, especially when his generals—including one of his sons—insisted on my execution. He waved them off, and we spoke briefly outside his tent.”

“I assume it wasn’t casual conversation concerning the weather, or was it?” Alistair jested while sipping his wine.

“No, it wasn’t,” I said thoughtfully, while the ancient scene continued to play in my mind. “He knew I was different. Maybe it was on account of his affection for shamanism, or my non-Persian appearance.”

“And, just like that he let you go?”

“When I told him I intended to pursue the Shah to Urgench, He gave me a horse and enough jerky to last a few days. I would’ve survived without the rations, but didn’t want to offend him. I thanked him and promptly left. It wasn’t long before I heard anguished cries behind me….”

“You know what his men did to the people of Samarkand, correct?”

“Yes. But, I didn’t see any of it,” I said. “It wasn’t until I gave up my search for Ala

ad-Din and returned to the city's ruins a few months later. I'll never forget the pyramids that filled the plain outside the broken city walls."

"Pyramids made up of human heads, of helpless men, women, and children that Genghis Khan's men slaughtered outside the city without mercy," said my son, quietly. It was as if he shared the mental image of the terrible, foul scene I came upon that midsummer afternoon so long ago.

To this day I see it all clearly, beneath a cloudless sky. Memories do get buried in my mind, but a byproduct of my curse is the clarity they still have when they return. No matter the event, it is as if it happened yesterday. Always.

"Why did you go back to Samarkand?"

"To find my coin," I told him. "I foolishly assumed Ala ad-Din took it with him, but I soon learned the Shah had left his entire wealth behind him. The coin was hidden with other treasures beneath the palace. When I returned, however, the Shah's thick vaults had been completely plundered by the Mongols. There was nothing there…just a dead city."

"And, your 'feel' didn't warn you that you were on the wrong track, huh?"

Careful, my boy. I know what you're getting at.

"I ignored my instincts, since I'd already decided to not hang out in Samarkand any longer than necessary."

"Do you ever think you might've been able to save any of the people had you stayed?"

"No."

But that's not necessarily true. It would've been extremely dangerous, but I've long been haunted by the likelihood I could've saved a few of the children. I had encountered a number of orphans in the city. If I hadn't been so consumed with chasing after a villain, who in the end didn't even have what I wanted, maybe I would've seen the opportunity to save someone other than myself.

If I could do it all over again right now, yes I would risk life and limb to carry as many as I could out of harm's way.

"That was unfair of me to ask," said Alistair, as if sensitive to the cloud suddenly taking over my countenance. "How did the coin get from Samarkand to Hong Kong?"

"At the time, I had no idea what became of it," I confessed, trying to push the unpleasant images of the plain of human pyramids out of my awareness. "I had no idea what became of it for almost four hundred years. The journals you mentioned earlier mark the beginning of its reintroduction to the world."

"Your journals talk about the Mongol Queens, who carried some powerful influence in the Mongolian Empire," continued Alistair, who in effect had taken over my story. I chuckled at the irony. "One of them, named Khutulun, was mentioned by you as having the coin."

"Yes, that's true." I nodded approvingly. "She was the exception as far as being affected by the curse is concerned. I almost missed the connection to her, since the coin's curse affected her parents and seemed to skip a generation before bringing calamity to her

descendants. But, after it passed through her hands to her son, and from him to his daughter, intermarriage with a wealthy merchant in southern China was what brought the coin to this part of the world."

"I thought it didn't surface in Hong Kong until 1851?"

"Correct, again, Ali. Generations of merchants in the Cheung family line eventually found their way here, in 1737, and through intermarriage with the Gu family, the coin ended up here."

"Hmmm…. That's quite a bit of history, Pops, and to think it could've turned out differently had Ala ad-Din Muhammad chosen differently," said Alistair, pausing to finish his wine. "Your tale didn't take near as long as you thought it would. Maybe we should start keeping records like you used to do with your journals, and include them with the coins. We can research the ones we already have when we get back to D.C., and keep a log for the ones still out there that you've got a hot 'feel' for."

"Sure, we can do that, son."

In truth, it might be a good thing for Alistair, especially, since I pictured a difficult adjustment ahead for him. Teaching history to college kids had been his life and passion for most of his adulthood. He'll need a new hobby, at least in the short term.

The big thing now was making sure this coin didn't get away again. I could feel its pull getting stronger. Despite often being in the same general locale with this elusive coin during the past few centuries, the last time I had been close enough to see its glow was nearly eight hundred years ago. Somehow, I had to get close to my coin again in the next few days, and make sure I didn't leave Hong Kong without it. I sure as hell didn't want to wait another eight hundred years before the next good opportunity came along.

Chapter 3

We returned to our room around eight o'clock. Determined to catch an amazing sunset, Alistair decided the outdoor pool atop the building would provide the best vantage point, and hurriedly left my presence. Despite his budding love affair with Amy Golden Eagle, I sensed his real interest was in 'scenery' unrelated to the sun's disappearance in Kowloon Bay. In the past I might've joined him, but Beatrice's steady return to youth had altered my perspective on that sort of thing.

When I ended the first installment of my story at her Good Shepherd bedside, it had all the makings of a fabulous romantic reunion for us. My beloved wife seemed to recognize

me when she awoke. The age-defying crystals had begun to heal her tired and worn body, as well as her mind, and I was beside myself with joy. Unfortunately, her only recollection of me was as her grandson—the ruse created twenty years ago by Alistair to explain my sudden appearance in his life.

I've tried to take comfort when she eyes me curiously and says things like, "William… you truly remind me of my late husband—*your* grandfather and namesake. Oh, how I wish you had known him!" Alistair almost made the blunder once of telling her that I really am her husband, but I interrupted him before he could. He soon realized it's best to wait until her mind fully heals and she can handle hearing the truth about me.

It could be years before Beatrice sees me as the William she dearly loved long ago. At least she'll finally be able to leave the nursing home when we return to Washington. She's moving in with us, into Alistair's spacious penthouse condo. I'm actually more excited about that event than the coin we hope to collect during our Hong Kong visit.

As I sat on my bed, smiling while I thought about this stuff, the phone rang. The hotel operator stated an old friend who'd already called three times that evening waited on the line.

"Go ahead and send the call through," I said, releasing a low sigh. She sounded grateful that I would finally agree to speak to Michael Lavoie. "Hello?"

"Hello, William. Are you enjoying your little game of avoiding me?" Michael sounded annoyed.

"No games here," I said, unable to stifle a slight snicker in response to his little dig. "I don't work for you guys, and I'm done enduring your coercion efforts—even the clever ones you've come up with lately. It's long overdue. My dad and I will finally enjoy a vacation without CIA interference."

"Shhhh!!" he whispered harshly.

"Oh, come on, Mike. I doubt anyone who gives a damn is listening in right now—definitely no one who means a damned thing to you or me."

Honestly, that might not be true when a ruthless Russian assassin brought back from the dead was on the loose. I laughed irreverently anyway.

"We need your help—"

"No you don't!" I interrupted him. "Like I told you before, you need to quit blackmailing civilians to take care of your shit. You've got plenty of trained men and women to easily handle whatever it is you need done."

There, that should do it. Succinct, though delivered with less panache than Michael's vanity would prefer.

"We can't get close enough to this one," he said, releasing his own low sigh. There was pain in his voice. My longest standing supervisor with the CIA was up against a wall. "Time is of the essence, William. Something terrible will happen if this guy slips out of Hong Kong with whatever he came for."

"Whom are we talking about?"

“Christian Morrow.”

“Christian Morrow, the high-end antiques dealer—that Christian Morrow?”

I had heard of him, and must admit to having a slight curiosity about the man who has successfully outbid me on several occasions for rare baroque timepieces. That’s something else I collect—clocks, sundials, watches, and other related items from centuries past. If not for my obsession with recovering my own coins, some of you might appreciate my attraction to devices that have helped mark the passing of nearly two millennia on this planet.

I’ve never met the man, this Christian Morrow. A small army of representatives handles his business affairs across the globe. It’s the same way his father, Jeremiah Morrow, oversaw his unscrupulous dealings in the antiquities black market in the late 1970s.

“Yes, only he has recently branched out into…other areas,” said Michael, obviously uncomfortable about revealing pertinent details over the phone. I laughed again, this time at the irony of him telling me who it was they were interested in, since that information was just as proprietary as the nefarious business into which the younger Morrow had immersed himself. “Sam is out there in Hong Kong right now. Let me arrange a meeting between you both. Once you get the full details, you’ll see this diversion will be far easier than anything we’ve asked the past few years.”

“I’ll have to think about it and get back to you, Mike,” I told him, irritated he’d already sent Agent Sam Daniels to further twist my arm. “I promised Dad there’d be no involvement from you guys, and lo and behold, that oath is about to go along the same path as the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.”

“The *what?”*

“Never mind.” I suddenly wished I had joined my son on his bikini tour atop the hotel’s roof. “You should get out more, Mike…see a few places, maybe enjoy life.”

“Not everyone can carry on like a kid, with nary a responsibility tethering their hands to a desk,” he replied, coolly. “And, after all that our great nation has done for your ungrateful ass, William! Your country needs you, and we deserve your *utmost* respect after a long lifetime of catering to your needs and acting like we don’t know!”

Huh?

I almost said ‘don’t know what?’ but caught myself. Despite the far-reaching implications of his words, he could merely be referring to my earlier days officially working for the agency before I retired in 1996. Not many folks in the agency these days are aware of that fact, and merely look upon me as a civilian novelty. But, it was quite a leap to believe Michael knew about my carefully guarded secret identity—even though he’d often openly wondered at my ‘compelling youthfulness’. It was better to not think about it, since it could only mean trouble—either borrowed or real.

“On the contrary, my ass has been quite grateful for what my country has done for me and my dad. And, I’d say we’ve more than made up for any shortfalls you guys keep coming up with.” My hand holding the receiver shook with rage. “So, I’m not going to

listen to this shit. Good luck with finding someone more suitable to your mission!”

I only waited a moment for his reply, and hung up when all he gave me was silence on the other end. I hate being rude, but loathe being manipulated much more. Even so, I knew Michael wouldn’t give up easily. Alistair and I would hear from him again…soon.

Very soon, as it turned out.

Chapter 4

“Mom told me to tell you hello and to stay out of trouble.”

My heart skipped a beat as Alistair said this, shortly after we hailed a taxi in front of the Royal Garden. Just after seven-thirty that Tuesday morning, the humidity was thick, despite a clear sky. By noon, the weather would be sweltering.

“How did she sound?”

“Like my mother.” He grimaced slightly before stepping inside the cab.

Dressed casually in blue jeans, short-sleeve dress shirts and loafers, we hardly looked like serious coin enthusiasts ready to take on one of the more extravagant exhibits and auctions either of us had seen in years. But with only one coin as our target and the promise of a hot, sticky day, it seemed pointless to stand around in business suits waiting to confirm the collection owned by Cheung Yung-ching actually contained my tainted silver shekel.

“Nothing’s changed since four days ago,” continued Alistair, once our driver set out across Victoria Harbour. “She still thinks you’re my kid.”

“Well, what else did you two talk about?”

“She wants to change the décor in the living room and her bedroom,” he said, wearing an amused expression. “Mom says the artifacts on my walls are far too masculine and garish for her tastes.”

“So, she actually looked at the pictures you left her?” I worried she might ignore them or absently toss the damned things in the wastebasket next to her nightstand. Could this mean the cloud of disjointed thoughts was finally lifting? “Sounds like she’s at least considering the general layout of your place…and your questionable taste.”

“It’s definitely a start, Pops.” He paused to look through his window at the bustling harbor. “I told her we should be back home by Sunday. At least that’s what the itinerary

indicates."

"If we purchase the coin today, I'll get us on the first plane to Tokyo tomorrow," I assured him, drawing a curious look in the rearview mirror from our driver. I had noticed this middle-aged man struggled with English, and some of the words he spoke to a bellhop at the hotel sounded like an older version of Cantonese. "Could you handle another jet-lagged trip this soon?"

"I'd like to see a few sights first," he admitted, "but I could be ready to leave here by Thursday."

"Whatever you want to do works for me."

Our taxi soon pulled up to the main entrance to the convention center. A large crowd of serious coin enthusiasts had already gathered. The first day was an exclusive event intended for a select group with tickets purchased in advance. General admission wasn't scheduled to happen until the following day, and the local news called for a crowded affair for both Wednesday and Thursday.

"Is the pull getting stronger?" my boy whispered, after we and about forty other collectors were ushered inside the building. A beautiful young woman and a forty-ish pudgy man led the way to a secured section. Both were Chinese, although the female's facial features hinted at some other heritage, as well. "I'd imagine you can see its faint bluish glow by now."

"The pull hasn't changed yet," I replied, nonchalantly. The coin's call had softened since we stepped inside the building. Not a good sign, but I wanted to be sure something was truly amiss before passing this information on to Alistair. "I might not be able to see it until we're right up on the damned thing."

"Here we are!" announced the woman, soon after we stepped into a cherry paneled room filled with expensive display cases. My heart began to race while my mind filled with childlike anticipation. "Feel free to look around for as long as you like. Our Event Director, Lao Wee Kiat James, will gladly assist you with general inventory questions, and I will answer the more specific questions you might have."

Everyone fanned out, with most in attendance moving to the display cases containing the ancient Mongolian artifacts available only for this event. Others approached the precious coins that came to Hong Kong from three continents. I was the only one interested in the silver shekels from the Cheung collection. Even before I approached the case, I knew it didn't contain the one I earnestly sought.

"The right one isn't here, is it?" Alistair joined me after viewing early coin examples from the Mongolian Empire.

"No it isn't," I confirmed, sighing deeply. "It's around here someplace…probably buried beneath one of the buildings out here, or in one of the crypts within the nearest cemetery."

"Oh, shit!"

"Oh, shit, indeed."

“So, what do we do?”

“I don’t know yet…probably go back home without it.”

“Maybe we should walk around outside along the waterway,” Alistair suggested. “Maybe it’ll help re-hone the signal and lead you right to it, like in Iran last year.”

“Perhaps.” I didn’t think it would help anything. The coin’s pull felt strongest on the plane, just before we landed. Noticeably weaker since then, it could be lying on the South China Sea’s floor. “The best thing to do, is get your sightseeing out of the way today, son, so we can leave tomorrow.”

“You’re going to give up that easily?” He looked at me incredulously.

“I’m too damned tired and annoyed to look any further for it. Barring a major miracle, I think it’ll be years before I pursue this one again.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and prepared to lead the way out of the building. We almost ran over the pretty lady who noticed our perturbed facial expressions and came to our aid.

“May I help you find something?”

Her voice was lovelier than I imagined it being when she barked her advisement to the group earlier. Impeccably attired in a dark pinstripe pantsuit with a red silk blouse, she carried herself very well despite her youth. It was as if looking into the face of an ancient soul. But what captured my son’s and my attention was her nametag. Cheung Sulyn.

“By any chance, are you related to the owner of this fine collection?” I asked.

“He is my grandfather,” she said proudly. “It is a rare thing for him to offer a look at his coin collection. Unlike most of the coins on display this week, none of his are for sale.”

Ms. Cheung certainly misread my intent. Despite the presence of two U.S. gold eagles in his eclectic compilation, I was interested in only one coin…one he obviously didn’t possess.

“It’s quite a collection, Ms. Cheung,” said Alistair, stepping over to the eagles. He offered an approving nod while stroking his chin. “You must be very proud. I know I would be.”

As had often been the case in recent months, my son’s charms were easily more disarming than my own. I intended to let him chitchat for a few minutes, but suddenly felt a chill travel up and down my spine. A familiar face peered out from the shadows across the room. Its owner had been watching us, gazing intently. I took a few steps toward this person, and whoever it was disappeared into deeper dimness.

For those unaware, my ears are quite sensitive. I often liken my auditory abilities to that of a domesticated canine. I doubt anyone else noticed the door click—not even the Event Director, Mr. Lao, who stood less than twenty feet away from our voyeur. But from the subtle footsteps across the floor and how the door was closed, I knew immediately this was someone with decades of experience in discreet surveillance. Skills of a rare master.

It wasn’t anyone from the agency I once supported, but it wasn’t the villain Viktor Kaslow either—although it was someone with more in common with Mr. Kaslow than my

CIA cronies. An immortal, and one I hadn't seen in person in nearly a century, despite occasional phone calls.

"Well, I'll be damned," I whispered, shaking my head.

"What's up, Pops?" Alistair followed my gaze toward the shadowed section of the room. "You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"I'm not feeling so good. Can we go now…*please?"*

Alistair politely excused himself from Ms. Cheung's presence, and I felt bad for him since I didn't leave him the opportunity to properly introduce himself to her. Perhaps for the best, since I intended to get us out of Hong Kong immediately. And, I no longer wanted to wait until the next day. I intended to leave that night.

Chapter 5

Alistair foiled my intentions of getting the hell out of Dodge as quickly as possible, insisting instead on the sightseeing he had his heart set on. Fortunately, a few intense minutes of negotiation in the back of our latest taxi allowed me to whittle his list of six destinations down to two: the science museum and the Nan Lian Garden.

The museum was decent, though no more impressive than similar museums in India and Japan. Nan Lian Garden, however, is considered a top ten attraction in Hong Kong with good reason. I found myself captivated by its quiet beauty and the feeling of peace that seemed to envelope us both as we moved along the colorful walkways that afternoon. It brought me back to the ancient bonsai gardens I once visited long ago in both China and Japan, and the shaded escape from the summer heat and the gentle waterways made me almost forget the looming threat of Viktor Kaslow and the sudden appearance of my old friend.

We returned to the hotel by three o'clock, and while Alistair showered I took the opportunity to look into booking a flight back to Tokyo that evening. While on hold with an agent for Delta Airlines, my cell phone suddenly rang. I briefly debated whether to answer the incoming call or not, but realized there was no way to hide from Roderick Cooley. He had found me already. Despite the dread I felt from his first intrusion into my life since we last spoke face-to-face in July 1908, I was honestly curious as to why he sought direct contact with me at a coin convention in Hong Kong. Especially, after it had been nearly nine years since our last phone chat.

"So, what brings you to Hong Kong?" I said, after I disconnected the call to the airline.

“What? No ‘How was your trip?’ or ‘What have you been up to for the past decade?’” Roderick chuckled warmly, and I felt some comfort at hearing his jovial Celtic accent. “It’s been far too long since we’ve held communion, William.”

I almost hated the way he said my name, since it sounded cheap and trivial. Yet, I doubted it was done on purpose. He was the one who came up with my name in the first place, when my previous moniker of Emmanuel didn’t sound American enough. I remember, quite well, that it was I who thought the name William Barrow was far too insipid to be taken seriously as a member of the newly formed BOI. Roderick had recruited me to the agency on behalf of President Theodore Roosevelt, and sold me on the opportunity to investigate terrible crimes taking place on Indian reservations. I thought I could make a difference on behalf of my Native American friends—some of which knew my true identity by virtue of their tribal shamans.

“Yes, it has been too long, my friend,” I said. “But, you still haven’t answered my question.”

“You mean, why am I here?”

“Yes.”

The water turned off in the bathroom, and in just a minute Alistair would emerge.

“I’m sure you can figure it out, William,” he said, and his voice carried the telltale burn of longstanding irritation. It could be on account of me…or it could be his waning fondness for the bureaucratic charade that dictated how things are run in Washington. “Perhaps a better question would be, *where* the hell am I right *now?”*

He was someplace inside the Royal Garden complex.

“I take it this is not merely a social call, then?” My turn to add fire to the conversation. “And, here I thought I might finally get to introduce you to Alistair.”

“Someday. Perhaps very soon,” he replied, chuckling again. “But, not today. It’s best your kid be kept out of our business for a while longer.”

“I thought you’d say that,” I suddenly wanted to end the conversation. Alistair would be stepping into the living area at any moment, clothed in his bath towel. “Where do you want to meet?”

“I’m presently standing in the east corner of the parking garage adjacent to your hotel, third level,” Roderick advised. “I will wait for you here…unless you take longer than twenty minutes.”

“Be there in ten,” I said, just as Alistair stepped around the corner. I forced a warm smile for my son while we traded curious glances, and then he moved over to the coffee table to pick up the remote for the TV.

“See you then, William.”

Roderick hung up before I could respond with anything else. I prepared to excuse myself from Alistair’s presence, knowing I couldn’t avoid the truth about my upcoming meeting. It wouldn’t be easy to convince him to stay put until I returned, but that was exactly what had to happen. Fortunately, him being half-naked with water dripping down

his back gave me a head start. Before he could intercept me while reaching for his clothes, I had already exited the room.

* * *

“The beard fits you,” I said, as the tall figure stepped slightly out of the shadows in the only dimly lit area of the garage. I didn’t have to look toward the ceiling to know there was a recently broken lamp or two above us. “I dare say it makes you look more mature.”

Roderick’s baby face is smooth enough to pass for a youth in high school, and perhaps most people would assume he is that young, if not for his full head of white hair. Yes, we’re talking Santa Claus white, though he keeps it closely cropped ala Roman style. According to him, his hair color was a byproduct of when he was drowned in a bog located in what is now Northern Ireland. Part of a ritual designed to grant his tribe lasting protection from southern marauders and Roman legions, something in the rancid water saved his life and changed him forever.

Two defining characteristics have followed him ever since, and these traits frightened the holy hell out of the priests charged with his sacrifice. Like a vampire, Roderick’s skin caries the pale bluish tint of death, and his eyes that were once sky blue in his mortal state are lavender with tiny gold specs around the edges of his irises. He truly does look like a damned bloodsucker. Yet, Roderick is far from dead or vampiric. His heart works fine and his body temperature runs quite warm. He requires a similar nourishment regimen to mine, although I can go much longer without water than he can. If he ever truly desired to leave this world, a week without drinking fluids should do the trick. But, unlike me, Roderick has no desire to revisit loved ones waiting on the veil’s other side anytime soon.

“Do you think it works with the tinted glasses?”

Dressed casually in a light blue polo shirt and dark slacks, he stepped out of the shadows, allowing himself a cautionary glance beyond me. For the moment, we were alone in this section of the garage.

“As long as you keep the beard trimmed close to your face,” I said, returning his grin with the endearing smile I’ve used for so long I can hardly tell when it’s truly sincere or not. “I see you’ve upgraded your foundation and blush, as well. Looks good on your arms and hands, too.”

I believe his face literally blushed at that moment, though it would’ve been difficult to say for certain. I’m sure my once-close friend, who had roamed the earth for centuries by my side, is quite grateful for the advances in women’s makeup. Without that assistance, he’d still be mixing muddy soil to cover his paleness.

“It’s MAC,” he confessed, chuckling. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of the generous smile he was loath to share, as it often made his otherwise handsome appearance garish. “One of my connections in Los Angeles turned me on to it in 1989. It has granted me much more freedom to move about unnoticed.”

“Hmmm…the things we could’ve talked about in person over the past century, had we

made time for each other as we once did," I observed, feeling a brief prick from nostalgia. We had witnessed so many events in history. But it all came to an end when he decided to settle down permanently in the American colonies, at the dawn of the 1700s. "Perhaps someday we can take a moment to truly catch up on what we've missed from each other's lives."

"Indeed…I would like that."

He chuckled again, yet I could tell he meant the words he spoke.

"So…what brings you here?" I worried our relative privacy could end at any moment. "Last we spoke, you were getting out of this business. I figured you were—"

"Retired?" he interrupted me.

"Yes."

"William…*Judas*…how long have we known each other?"

"Long enough to know you don't take trips halfway across the globe to see the sights," I said, unable to play coy. "Something pretty big has got the brotherhood in Washington's dander up, or you wouldn't give a rat's ass about a coin convention. Did Michael put you up to this?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," he admitted. "Things are rapidly changing in American government, and the old families have regained the foothold they relinquished forty years ago. Certain activities make them quite nervous, especially when we're dealing with nuclear arms. And, that nervousness becomes highly toxic when new weapons of mass destruction are involved.

"I don't follow you."

"Yes, actually I believe you do…or perhaps you will, once you learn other facts involved here."

I didn't like the way this sounded, and even less the look in his eyes as he removed his glasses. Roderick's irises were aglow with energy. I knew from that alone if he could've avoided this meeting with an old friend, he would've done so.

"Well, shall we dance? Or, will you do me the courtesy of laying it out plainly?"

"First off, what I must relate pertains only to you," he said, pausing to release a pensive sigh. "Your secret is no longer safely hidden."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

I immediately felt my chest constrict, and it is one sensation I share with everyone else—mortal and immortal. Betrayal always seizes the heart.

"Michael, Cedric, and, of course, Paul, all know you are Judas Iscariot."

Count on a fellow immortal to not mince words in spelling out a hurtful truth.

"H-how long have they known?" I was stunned by his words. I could barely formulate an effective question from the sudden swirling panic that filled my mind.

"Paul has known for at least twenty years," he said, lowering his voice, as if it would

dampen the sting. “He claims to have deciphered your penchant for exotic trips after pictures of your growing coin collection surfaced at the agency in 1990. I’ve recently seen these photographs, taken between the discovery of coins twelve through seventeen.”

I shook my head, disbelieving, despite often feeling like the collection had been tampered with in my absence from the bowels of the well-respected industrial bank where the coins sat until six years ago. Alistair had wisely suggested we move it to a safer place, and once we determined his condo would be the best locale, I purchased a bank-grade steel vault and had it installed in his bedroom. At the time, we had recently procured coin number eighteen.

“Was it you who told them?”

“Me? Oh no…I’d never do anything like that, Judas,” he said, eyeing me solemnly. “We may not be as close as we once were, but I will always consider you as my dear friend and treat you as such forevermore.”

“Who was it, then?”

“I don’t know the betrayer’s identity. Paul’s connections make him the most likely candidate for being the first to know. I believe he passed the information on to Cedric and Michael, but not until five years ago. Whoever betrayed you put the bug in Paul’s ear to check your bank for suspicious dealings.”

“So, all of my direct contacts within the CIA have kept this big secret about me for years.” My anger rose rapidly to the surface. “When did you find out?”

“Two weeks ago.” Roderick glanced past me toward the elevator entrance across the parking lot. I followed his gaze, but saw nothing out of place. “It was after you stormed out of Michael’s office.”

I could almost picture the lockdown meeting that followed, where my former superiors discussed nefarious ways to maintain my indentured status.

“I’m so fucking done working with them!”

“That’s the reaction they expected, I’m afraid.”

“And, Paul…Paul Silverstein? He can kiss my real Jewish ass!” I seethed. Prepared to end my conversation with Roderick, I’d gather my kid and luggage, and get the hell out of Hong Kong! “Well, thanks for the update, man…. Maybe we can meet for dinner some night back in the States, after I chill from this whole damned fiasco!”

“It sounds like you’re ready to leave Hong Kong,” he observed, evenly. I glared at him in response. “But, you can’t leave here…at least not yet.”

“The hell you say!”

I turned to leave, and headed for the elevators.

“You are in grave danger, my friend. In truth, we all are, if Christian Morrow can’t be stopped.”

“Tell your director that’s really too bad and definitely none of my concern,” I retorted, barely glancing over my shoulder at where Roderick stood, half in shadow and half under

the dim glow of the unbroken lamps. “I’ve got more important things to attend to right now—like making sure Alistair remains in one piece!”

“If you leave here tonight, he won’t,” Roderick warned. “Kaslow is working for Mr. Morrow, and you and I both know your Soviet archenemy knows what you are!”

I stopped.

“The bullshit you speak of won’t cease until Alistair is dead and you end up in some other time and place,” he continued, lowering his voice again since I hadn’t moved. “Kaslow could try to do that without any further incentives. From what we understand, you are the reason he took the job with Morrow. It’s an added bonus that means more to him than the millions he is being paid.”

“And, how in the hell do you know all of this?”

I turned to face him, and slowly returned to where he waited.

“I wish I could tell you everything—and someday I will, I swear, Judas,” he said. “But, right now you have a job to seriously consider…. Long ago, you trusted me to find a vocation that would protect your cover—the same one that has protected me for more than one hundred and seventy years.”

“And, look how much good it’s done!”

“If you stop and seriously think about it, you will see this arrangement has served you well,” countered Roderick. “In fact, it has succeeded *very* well. If not for the folks in Washington pulling a few strings to get you a nice furlough in Glasgow after World War II, you might never have met your beloved wife, Beatrice.”

“What good is that now, since my cover has been *annihilated?”* I hated the whine creeping into my voice, and more that I couldn’t control it. “We could be sitting ducks for anyone wanting to get back at me for certain deeds I fulfilled for the great ‘U.S. of A’!”

“That’s why you’ll need to wait in your room until we give you instructions for your next move.”

“And, if I refuse and proceed to book the next flight out of here?”

“Then, you’ll have your freedom, Judas,” he said. “But, in the end it might cost you far more than it was ever worth. You and I used to talk about second chances…do you remember, my friend?”

“Yes…I do.”

“Long ago you saved your son from chemical destruction to his body, and later in life you provided hope to an elderly woman—your wife—who might’ve died hopeless without your frequent trips to Good Shepherd Nursing Home.” I no longer tried to fill in the blanks of how he knew all of this without actively participating in my life. “Those unique opportunities were not wasted when you saw them. Don’t waste them now.”

“I’ll have to think about it…I can let you know my decision in the next few hours.” True, he had brought up some good points, but still…. “If it puts Alistair in danger at all—especially since Kaslow is looking for me in this city as we speak—then all bets are off!”

“That seems fair,” he said, and suddenly glanced to his right. A pair of hotel patrons walked toward us. Likely, the young man and woman went about their personal business with nary a clue about a Russian hit man on the prowl, or the fact two unusual human beings conversed nearby.

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me if Paul and the gang knows your true identity, as well,” I said, trying to end our conversation on a lighter note. “I’ll be terribly disappointed if it’s only poor Judas who’s been discovered, and the pasty druid gets off scot-free…. Anything else you’d care to share about these demons in three-piece suits?”

He glanced again at the couple, who seemed to have stepped up their pace as they grew nearer to us.

“Just that you’re not alone in having your secrets uncovered,” he said, right before disappearing into the shadows again. “Our friendship has endured many trials in the past, and we’ve been exposed many times before now. Remember, as it was for us while we moved through centuries with our anonymity intact, it will someday be that way again.
Our bond may have waned at times over the years, yet in the end our connection has endured, my friend. I’ll be seeing you around, Judas.”

Roderick then disappeared. By the time the couple arrived, it might’ve looked like a hotel patron had a little bit too much to drink and was presently conversing with an invisible friend amid vacant cars. But, at least they didn’t have a damned clue who I was.

Chapter 6

“Tell me again why we must stay inside our suite tonight?”

Alistair stood at the door, peering through the peephole. We had ordered steak and lobster a half-hour before—my initial bribe to get him to buy into Roderick’s game plan—and my boy was on the patrol for our food. So much like his mother in that regard, hunger tends to remove him from humanity and relegate him to the planet’s primal beasts. I’ve often wondered if Alfred Packer suffered from a similar affliction when he ate his five buddies near Gunnison, Colorado after a terrible snowstorm in 1874.

“To make sure you and I are still on the same plane of existence when tomorrow arrives,” I told him. “We’ll be confined like this until I hear from Roderick again. Once I get the go ahead to leave, I’ll make reservations to go home, and we can get the hell out of here.”

“This trip has been an enormous waste of time!” he bemoaned, his slight brogue briefly reminding me of Roderick’s parting words earlier. “But at least our dinner is here.”

He opened the door just as our room service waiter arrived with a cart bearing our meal, along with two chilled bottles of Merlot. Cold wine is also my son’s preference, and one pushing my tolerance after centuries of drinking nearly everything at room temperature.

“I’ll make it up to you with a trip in July, to either Alaska or the Virgin Islands—your choice, Ali.”

“I think a quiet weekend with my girl sounds like a better deal,” he said, snagging a yeast roll while helping the waiter move the plates to our table. “No offense, but maybe we should take an extended break from these coin vacations.”

I wanted to agree with him—especially since our journeys had recently become far more dangerous than ever before. But, I doubt I’ll be able to overcome the nagging thought that something horrible would happen if I veered from the diligent pursuit of my blood coins. I tipped the waiter and closed the door, allowing myself a careful glance down either side of the hall first. The coast was clear for now.

“Don’t go secret service on me, Pops,” teased Alistair. “As soon as I get a little good food in my stomach, I want to hear more about your conversation with Roderick.”

As alluded to earlier, Alistair had never met Roderick. For years, my son thought this name was something I pulled out of a hat. It wasn’t until I witnessed my son’s astonished look during a speakerphone conversation with Mr. Cooley, fifteen years ago, that I realized he thought my druid friend didn’t exist.

“Okay, I can concentrate better now.” Alistair had eaten like a ravenous dog unfed for days. “So, what else did you two talk about?”

“Viktor Kaslow and some misguided millionaire,” I said. “Apparently, this rich guy deals in black market nuclear weapons and still has enough tokens in the till to pay Kaslow a cool few million to help him negotiate for one particular mysterious weapon he covets. Oh, and killing me and possibly you has been thrown in as an extra incentive for our Russian friend.”

“Hmmm…similar to the extra millions the Shanahans will get if the ‘Skins ever get to a Super Bowl again, huh?” he said, chuckling. “I suppose Vegas would put Kaslow’s odds quite a bit higher for knocking us off.”

“I’d prefer to believe your football team has better chances,” I said, lifting my wine glass in salute. “May Christian Morrow be stopped and Viktor Kaslow choke on his crystals!” I laughed, hoping our mood stayed this cheerful.

“I’ll drink to that! But, who is Christian Morrow?”

“Just a bad guy who happens to be very rich.”

“The name sounds familiar,” he said, frowning as if searching his mind for a connection. “Well…hopefully we’ll kick his ass and get something worthwhile out of this misadventure after all.”

We clinked our glasses together.

“And, may the CIA *finally* leave us the hell alone!” I added, pausing to pour wine into both of our glasses. “Better yet, may they forget I’m Judas Iscariot.”

“What?!”

Oops.

In all seriousness, I intended to tell him straight away what I learned about the leak of my true identity that afternoon. But, I just couldn’t find the right moment to spring the news.

“You didn’t mean what I’m thinking you meant, Pops…or did you?”

“Unfortunately, it’s exactly as it sounds,” I said, grimacing. “Apparently, my former employers have known this information for quite some time. Roderick seems to think it happened roughly around the time you became paranoid about leaving the coins in the bank’s safe-deposit box.”

“That was right after we returned home with the coin from Portugal…I remember it quite well.” He nodded thoughtfully. “I actually started feeling weird about it two years earlier, when I thought someone had rifled through the box in our absence. I should’ve allowed you to build the damned vault back then.”

Yes, you should have, my dear boy. You didn’t want to be saddled with a bulky safe in your new condominium. But, who’s keeping score?

“Well, the important thing is to improve our wariness as we go forward, and hopefully I’ll soon learn the identity of who betrayed me,” I said. “I have a strong suspicion this person is also responsible for Kaslow’s sudden interest in me and my whereabouts.”

“All right…and here’s my counter proposal in light of what you’ve shared tonight.” He leaned back in his chair after lighting his pipe. “If we hear from Roderick tonight or early tomorrow morning, we go with whatever he tells you, Pops. However, if we don’t hear from him in a timely manner, then I say we shouldn’t sit around waiting for him to call us. Either you call him at that point, or you can join me on a trip around the islands tomorrow afternoon.”

“We’re done with the sightseeing,” I advised, adding a touch of surliness like a good father should. “There will be no trips anywhere tomorrow, unless it’s to the airport. Do you follow me?”

“And, if Viktor Kaslow or this Morrow guy never show up at our door, that’ll give us one more reason to call this vacation a frigging disaster from hell!” He got up from the table and moved over to the sliding door to our balcony. He opened the door slightly, and immediately the stream of smoke following him seemed to hurry toward freedom outside. “I’m serious, Pops, snorkeling and an evening tour of the city is what you can look forward to doing—along with waiting to fly back to the States until Saturday.”

“Are you insane?!”

“No more than you!” He came back to me, holding his pipe in the lecture pose that had long been his habit. “I think you’re being a little too paranoid—especially about some rich

businessman hiring Viktor Kaslow to knock us off. How preposterous!"

"I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you, Ali," I said, picturing Viktor's fine cutlery I got a close up of in Iran.

"Nothing will." He smiled confidently as he patted my shoulder. "And, again, if Roderick calls early enough, I'll do whatever he says. But, if things turn out like I think they will, we switch to *my* game plan. Fair enough?"

Not really.

I shot my son an endearing look to affirm his take on this conversation, since it seemed pointless to argue further. He seemed quite pleased with himself and the prospect of enjoying some vacation fun in Hong Kong, after all. In the end, however, none of that carried much weight with me. I will always do everything in my power to make sure my progeny remains safe…with or without his cooperation.

Chapter 7

As I'm sure most of you can appreciate, I enjoyed a restless night, with almost no sleep. Not that lack of sleep is normally an issue. Often I can go days on end without an extended rest period. But, whenever alcohol is involved, I actually get tired enough to close my eyes for a 'power nap'. Sometimes, great inspiration comes to me that way.

Not that night. At least not right away….

All possible mishaps related to my blown cover flitted before my mind's eye as I lay in my bed, listening to Alistair's light snores from his bedroom in our suite. It may sound strange, but I've always drawn comfort from his snoring, as I also did long ago from Beatrice. It's as if part of me is ever fearful they could die at any moment, and a terror far greater than a violent death in my presence would be to find either one cold and lifeless in their beds the next morning.

I tried to think about positive things, like the fact Alistair and I could now spend more leisure time together. Not long after he left his post at Georgetown, I decided to leave the Smithsonian. Granted, my coin research efforts would be impacted by the lack of field notes and artifacts to which only an archivist (or someone higher in the Institute) would have access. But, knowing my days of prowling in the bowels of the famed museum were numbered, this past February I began diligently transferring files from the archives to a small zip drive I carried with me. Once I figured out how to skirt around the Institute's security clearances, I carefully focused my efforts on gathering all pertinent information regarding the last thirteen potential hot spots for where my final eight coins likely lay

hidden.

Of course, since we were presently in one of these places, my mood quickly spiraled down into despair. Looking for the coin that had spent centuries in the Cheung family's possession was like searching for a needle in a haystack. I had no idea where to look next.

Making matters worse was the intrusion into my personal mental space of Kaslow's smug grin. My mind drifted back to Caracas again…. I pictured him clearly as he watched me from less than fifty feet away. I had just finished planting duplicate documents for the ones I lifted from a Belarus diplomat's apartment in the city's outskirts, and had stepped outside the building. While it isn't unusual for those working covertly for their governments to sometimes catch a glimpse of one another in the field, it is very unusual to engage someone directly. Not unless it's with the intent to capture, interrogate, and dispose of such a person.

Even from a safe distance, I could see a contemptuous leer upon Kaslow's face. Not only was he letting me know he understood what I had been up to inside the apartment, but he intended to obliterate my efforts. That recognition saved my existence as William Barrow, since I didn't immediately see the rocket launcher he carried. But I sensed it. Sensed it lucidly in my mind's eye, and quickly determined where I needed to dive for cover.

In my Royal Garden bed, I watched myself turn my head in horror toward an explosion behind me, as all five units in the 1920s building were destroyed. Several innocent people died, and I heard the screams of a woman and her child…and could do nothing for them. Innocent people always die when Viktor Kaslow is around. By the time I looked again to where he'd stood, the spot was empty, and the sound of a motorcycle speeding away was the only evidence he left behind.

Unfortunately for me, my mind will forever carry this image amid the late morning sunshine and raindrops from an earlier downpour dripping from the leaves of cecropia trees and a large palm near the building's burning remains. That, and of course, Kaslow's youthful mug leering at me.

While staring into the darkness above my bed, I considered how easy life could be if Beatrice, Alistair, and I lived someplace else—maybe on a deserted island in the South Pacific. However, the reality that my beloved wife and son couldn't manage without modern comforts nixed the fantasy in its infancy.

What about someplace overflowing with modern comforts and conveniences? A place far, far away from America and hopefully out of reach from Kaslow's homicidal radar.

Australia? The Philippines, maybe? Or…New Zealand?

New Zealand sounded intriguing, and I had visited both islands on a regular basis back in the early 1900s. This wonderful country offered nearly every climate and terrain I loved, and the people were strong and kind to strangers. I started making the arrangements to relocate my family to this wonderful country in my mind. I even added special accommodations in my fantasy world for Larissa Jones to come along as Beatrice's private nurse and companion.

But, what about Alistair and his girl, Amy Golden Eagle—who would probably not go

anywhere without her brother, Jeremy? That made five people and counting….

I drifted off to sleep thinking about this shit. When I do rest in this manner, my consciousness moves through a narrow corridor where I am completely surrounded by thick darkness. The corridor seems endless, and along both sides of the corridor I sense souls of the dead…watching me, and speaking in whispers too faint to decipher.

Of course, none of this is likely real—I don't see dead people. Even so, it marks the place where my dreams start. Most of the time these events are peaceful—despite the heavy burden of guilt I've carried since my ultimate betrayal of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem two millennia ago.

Occasionally, I'm visited by nightmares. That night, I thought such an event was happening. Loud explosions erupted around me, and clods of falling soil fell onto my head. Crouching inside a cavern approximately fifty feet wide and less than five feet in height, the only illumination came from a hole in the center of the cave. Through this entrance, an assembly line of Chinese men dressed in silk changpaos moved up and down a pair of thatched wooden ladders, carrying small steamer chests into the cave from above. The jingle of metal on metal when each chest was stacked along a rear wall in the room made it seem like items of significant value were being stored there.

The explosions grew louder, and the men scrambled in panic, peering anxiously toward the opening as they continued their task. A voice called shrilly to the others from above the entrance, and then machine gun fire sprayed into the hole, sending a man's bullet-riddled body tumbling down upon his terrified companions. Everyone scurried into the cavern's shadows, carrying what they could.

Roughly a dozen more men descended into the cave, and these were attired differently than the first group. I recognized the black boots and dark blue pants from what the Japanese infantry wore during World War II. But, I'd never been this close to them—even when I enlisted with the U.S. armed forces in the Pacific.

The soldiers crept deeper into the cave and opened fire toward the shadowed depths. To my right, a lantern burning low exploded into flames when a bullet hit. The fire spread quickly, igniting several chests. One of the Chinese survivors moved over to one of the chests, where the lid had popped open slightly. I caught a glimpse of a metal armor vest in the firelight, along with something faint…but glowing blue.

Holy shit, it's my coin!

I tried to get closer to it, as the Japanese soldiers fired upon the defenseless man. He fought desperately to close the chest's lid before he died, as if it were direly important to do so. But he failed to shut it. I tried to get close enough to verify the coin bore the eagle and Caesar's profile, until an invisible force prevented me from drawing any nearer.

All at once, the world around me grew dark and I was pulled back into my hotel room. I cursed silently at the lost opportunity to mentally take notes on the cave's physical details, as well as the chest's other contents illuminated by the coin's soft glow. Contents important enough for a man to sacrifice his life protecting them.

Where in the hell was the place I saw? Based on what I observed, the cave had to be someplace in China…likely this area. I had read accounts of what happened during the

Battle of Hong Kong, which was the Japanese invasion that came within hours after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Think, William…where is this place?

The vision's images that seemed completely real had already begun to fade. I fought to hang on to the textures embracing my senses. Things like the earthen smell, the panicked voices of the men about to die, and other sounds besides gunshots and explosions.

I had heard gulls screeching nearby and the crash of water.

The frigging thing must be buried along the coast!

Either in a cave within Hong Kong proper itself, or on one of the surrounding islands, it was almost as dire a prospect as my coin being buried beneath the city's sprawling skyline. Not to mention, the Japanese very likely had plundered the cave.

My blood ran cold. Yet, something told me the soldiers I saw in my dream hadn't taken my coin. Despite my mind's logical protests, my heart said the cave's contents had been left alone and the coin awaited my claim. My left hand began to tremble, further confirming I'd find my prize…provided Viktor Kaslow didn't end my present lifetime first.

I now had renewed inspiration to remain in Hong Kong.

Alistair would be so pleased…and Roderick, not so much.

Chapter 8

The Hong Kong heat was sweltering Wednesday afternoon. But, at least it wasn't raining. Perfect weather for a boat ride, I could hardly wait to get started on my search of the coast and surrounding islands.

If only Alistair saw things the same way.

"Pops, you're not the only one with an interest in rare coins. We barely had an opportunity to see what was on display the other day," he said. "Since you advised this morning that you planned on ignoring Roderick's warning to stay put, I knew we'd have to squeeze in as much as possible today. How long do you think it will take him, or someone else in the agency, to react?"

"Not long," I said, following him into the cab after scanning the area for any sign of a known friend or foe. So far we were in the clear. "But, I'd think the chances of being

interrupted—and possibly you put on a plane back to the States—will be far greater if we return to the coin exhibition. Let's keep it to an hour, and head to the harbor. Okay?"

"As long as it's a full hour once we get there, I'm game," he, said, sounding glum. "And as far as me leaving here without you? Not happening."

"They can be quite persuasive, you know."

"Maybe, But I'm not going back home without you. Especially not, if they give us bullshit for not following their silly rules."

Our driver smiled impishly at us through the rearview mirror. He couldn't be any older than nineteen—a kid named 'Yun Chan'. He drove with the ferocious confidence of a cabby twice his age. Too bad he couldn't be our chauffeur for the rest of our stay.

Several thousand coin enthusiasts milled about the Convention and Exhibition Centre's entrance in the unforgiving heat.

"Welcome back," said a lovely voice, approaching me from my left. Cheung Sulyn. "You look well today."

Dressed in a gray skirt and a light purple blouse with modest pumps on her feet, she looked more stunning than the day before. Her dark eyes seemed to take on a lighter hue from her wardrobe. Some people are like that. She must've gathered something amusing from my expression, since her graceful right eyebrow was raised ever so slightly. But, with the prospect of my dear Beatrice's recovery from Alzheimer's seemingly imminent, and the full restoration of her youth not far behind, I'd lost my edge as a flirt.

"Why thank you, Ms. Cheung," I told her, feeling my face heat up from slight embarrassment. "I do feel much better today."

Once Alistair caught up to me after viewing a display case bearing ancient Mongolian artifacts, she turned her attention to him. It was subtle, but I could tell she favored him. Something about the combination of his 'harmless' middle age appearance and natural charm, fed by his confident realization that he was getting younger by the day. Regardless, the smile she gave to him was a hell of a lot more radiant than the one she had offered to me and other patrons around us.

That's my boy!

Alistair is mostly clueless about his new sex appeal, as the only thing he's noticed is other people seem to like him better than in the past. Even his sometimes-surly disposition is easily forgiven. It makes me wonder what it will be like when he physically regresses to his mid-twenties.

He had picked up a nametag this time, and Ms. Chung's expression soon changed to surprise as she read it.

"Are you the famous author of books about the Middle East?" She suddenly covered her mouth as if ashamed by her enthusiasm. "I'm so sorry…that was rude of me to ask a question without being properly introduced."

"That's quite all right, Ms. Cheung, I should've done so yesterday when we had talked about your grandfather's Mongolian trays," said Alistair, smiling sheepishly. "As you can

tell, my name is Alistair Barrow, and this is my son, William."

He motioned to me proudly, and I was saddened for a moment that for so many years he had resigned himself to this arrangement. How hard it must've been for my son to watch his jaunty father ingratiate himself with so many women that Alistair might've enjoyed getting to know, but felt helpless against the fact he was getting older while I remained young.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Cheung," I said, nodding politely.

She did the same, perfunctorily, and then brought her attention back to him. I took my karma with delight and grace.

"Please call me by my western name, Sulyn," she said. "But, are you in fact the famous author?"

"Famous might be a bit of a stretch, but the books you referred to are penned by me."

"That is incredibly fortunate for me, then!" she enthused, but then caught herself again. She shot a cautious glance to Mr. Lao, the Event Director, who stood chatting with a dark haired Caucasian man wearing an expensive suit. The man had his back to us.

"If I might impose, would it be possible for you to meet with my grandfather, Cheung Yung-ching? He is a great admirer of your work, Mr. Barrow," she said to Alistair. "He is not well, and does not have much time left with us. If you could spare an hour and meet with him at the hospital, you will make an old man and his granddaughter very happy."

"I'd be honored. Would tomorrow morning work with your schedule and his?"

"Perhaps it will," she said, and her smile brightened her countenance and allure. Alistair blushed. "I will check with him and get back with you. I assume you are staying in one of the hotels nearby? I can leave you a message and directions on how to get to the hospital. I will need to meet you there, since he is surrounded by tight security."

"Sure," said Alistair. "We're staying at the Royal Garden, in room 619. If you need the phone number, I can get it for you."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Barrow."

She pulled out a small cell phone from a concealed pocket in her skirt and typed in the information he gave her. I took the opportunity to find out more about her godfather-ish grandpa.

"Isn't it a bit unusual to travel with bodyguards in the city these days?"

"The old ways still pervade here, despite the incorporation of modern outlooks in Hong Kong," she said, regarding me as if I were a cuddly lost puppy with an enormous weeping sore on its face. "My grandfather has lived a very long life, and has prospered well. Along the way, he has made many friends and enemies. He is a man known for his generosity and his harshness, although I have only experienced the kind and gentle man that he is."

"I see…."

Alistair mentioned the extensive journals I keep. Several passages are dedicated to

Cheung Yung-ching and his unscrupulous business practices. Everything from money laundering, drugs, jewel smuggling, and murder.

The man speaking with Mr. Lao suddenly laughed uproariously over something the Event Director said to him. Mr. Lao looked confused and smiled painfully, nodding in all directions as if to politely get us all to return to our conversations. But, then the man said something that caught Alistair's and my full attention.

"So, I'm supposed to believe this is the *entire* Cheung coin collection?"

Expecting another nod from the solemn-faced Mr. Lao, it's not what happened. He glanced uncomfortably at Cheung Sulyn.

"It is the entire collection that was promoted across the world, prior to this exhibition," she said, stepping over to the boisterous rich guy. Something about him that I instantly didn't like, and it wasn't his choice of light beige for an Armani suit. "Every item on display matches the list we advertised."

"Bullshit," he said, and then paused to survey those in closest proximity to him. "I don't care what your damned list says, you and the Convention and Exhibition Centre are holding out on us. I demand to speak with someone higher than you two clowns!"

I could feel Alistair bristle, and knew he'd go after this idiot. It wasn't worth drawing attention to our presence. I hadn't seen anyone covertly CIA or definitely Viktor Kaslow in the crowd around us, but if any of them were there, jumping into a customer satisfaction spat would be a sure way to end the hide and seek game.

Just before I grabbed my son's arm, while a murmur swept through the main level of the building, Sulyn moved up to the man and said something with more sweetness than I could've dreamed of mustering at that point. She nodded to Mr. Lao to bring the man with him and motioned for Alistair and me to follow them.

Very strange. Alistair hesitated, and at first so did I. But something in my gut urged me to hurry up and join them as they moved across the open hall to where the executive offices sat. My boy had the good sense to keep up, and we caught up to them just as Sulyn, Lao, and the asshole stepped inside a small boardroom. The sharp-dressed jerk gave us a disdainful look when Sulyn asked Alistair to close the door behind him.

"What are they doing here?" he sneered.

My first chance to study the man. Impeccable style, and grooming, with a hairline that covered up just a little too much forehead to be considered handsome. Even so, sleek facial features and bright green eyes would draw the favor of most females, and perhaps a few males, too.

His air hinted at inherited smugness. This was a soul poorly developed, but with the means to deliver harm to others. All of my senses were on edge.

"Perhaps it would be best if William and I wait outside for you to finish your business with this rude imbecile," suggested Alistair. "Unless you need our immediate assistance with this matter, Ms. Cheung."

The look of rage that spread over the man's face provided a stark contrast to Mr. Lao's

horrified expression, and amusement for me. This whole scene was preposterous, and seemed quite inappropriate for Sulyn to involve my son and me in this volatile situation. However, the amused glint in her eyes told me that she had a reason for doing this. Whether proper or not remained to be seen, or played out.

“I have a proposal that should make everyone happy,” she said, motioning for us to remain where we stood while sending a confident smile to Mr. Lao. “There are other coins available, and if I can persuade my grandfather to at least show them to you, would that satisfy you, Mr…?”

“Morrow. Christian Morrow,” he said, tugging on his coat sleeves as if that would somehow make him seem cooler—perhaps as much figuratively as it would for a man clad far too nattily for the weather.

He continued to scowl, but his tone revealed openness to her suggestion. Mr. Lao nodded gratefully, as if amazed that what started out badly on the floor hadn’t immediately escalated into something far worse.

“Since it is a part of the collection rarely seen outside our family, only you, Mr. Morrow, and Alistair Barrow and his son, William, will be allowed to see it. I can have it brought here tomorrow in the afternoon, provided my grandfather gives the okay….”

I believe Ms. Cheung said something else. But a strange and sudden dynamic had descended into the room, as this Morrow character—the guy my CIA contacts wanted me to chum up to—and my son stared at each other. It was almost magical watching scorn and suspicion morph into looks of recognition and—dare I say—admiration upon both my son’s and this miscreant’s faces.

“Dr. Barrow? You are *the* Dr. Alistair Barrow, who specializes in Middle Eastern studies at Georgetown University?” Morrow shook his head.

“Yes it is…. So, it is you, Christian,” my son replied, drawing a double take from me. It was as if he were addressing a long lost friend. “Did you ever act on the fellowship offered by my good friend, Dr. Norman Zaire, at North Carolina State?”

“Graduated in 2006, and the anthropology program was as great as you assured me that it would be.”

“Well, congratulations, Christian—it’s good to see you again.”

At least the conversation didn’t progress further. My boy and his new best buddy looked as if they suddenly remembered there were three other people in the room.

“So, this was a prized student?” I forced a smile while coldness seized my heart. “I’m sure you both have much to catch up on.” No, I didn’t like the man, and worried what might happen next, since Kaslow was supposed to be employed by Morrow.

“Yes, son, we do,” said Alistair, who probably would’ve added more zeal to his words if not for Cheung Sulyn’s disappointed expression. Getting us all together the next day for a rare viewing of her grandfather’s collection was definitely her intent, but not so much the chumminess. I do believe my son’s luster had been tarnished in her eyes. At least he seemed to notice. “Perhaps we can arrange something tomorrow, after we view the items Ms. Cheung has so graciously offered to show us.”

“Yeah, that would be good,” agreed Christian, the smugness returning to his countenance.

A serious talk about playing with vipers in a sandbox was in order for my boy.

“Let us make the arrangement for two o’clock tomorrow afternoon, and I can either call or email you both to confirm this meeting time for tomorrow later today,” said Sulyn.

She seemed anxious to end the private meeting and get us back out on the main floor. Even Mr. Lao seemed uptight, but at least his doughy face was no longer red. He moved quickly to lead us out of the room and back to the throng of coin enthusiasts. But before he did, Morrow stopped him, and turned his attention to Cheung Sulyn.

“Tell your grandfather I’d like to view anything and everything Mongolian he has accumulated during his lifetime,” he said, icily.

“I will see what I can do to honor your request, Mr. Morrow,” she said, her lips forming a thin, perturbed line. “But, I am fairly certain the Mongolian items in my grandfather’s collection are all here.”

“No, they’re not,” he assured her, and the remaining warmth in his eyes gave way to his soul’s chill. “I’m looking for something pertaining to Genghis Khan. Your grandfather once reported he inherited an ancient item, personal to the Mongolian Emperor…. Perhaps you know of what I speak?”

She shook her head, and I doubt my son noticed a telltale sign she was lying. But I did. I’m pretty sure Morrow noticed it, too. Or, maybe it was something he sensed. The eyes of both gave them away…hers flinching ever so slightly, and his taking on an acute glint that made his emerald peepers a little bit brighter.

“Ask Cheung Yung-ching about a map…one that is supposed to lead to the mythical ‘Mantle of Genghis Khan’. I guarantee he’ll know what you’re talking about.”

Morrow turned away from her, pushing past us all as he stormed out of the room with resolute purpose. His short boot heels clicked against the tiled floor as he hurried to the featured coin displays. I continued to listen long after the others couldn’t hear his footsteps anymore.

Chapter 9

“Should your coin turn up in Cheung Yung-ching’s more extensive collection, do you plan on stealing it if he won’t willingly part with it for a fair sum?”

Alistair and I had just placed our dinner orders at one of Hong Kong's premier restaurants specializing in northern Chinese cuisine, the Hutong. Before I tell you my answer to his brash question, allow me to bring us up to date.

After our interesting encounter with Christian Morrow, we soon parted ways with Cheung Sulyn and a visibly uptight Lao Wee Kiat James. To Sulyn's credit, she seemed largely unaffected by the American millionaire's aggressiveness. In contrast to Mr. Lao's haste to pursue Mr. Morrow out onto the convention floor, Sulyn leisurely escorted my son and me to her office down the hall to pick up a business card for Alistair. Then, she escorted us to the main entrance, taking the longer route so she and he could chat.

Sulyn arranged for us to meet at the hospital caring for her grandfather at eight-thirty the next morning. Our afternoon viewing of the rest of Cheung Yung-ching's collection was also set, for two o'clock.

We spent the rest of the afternoon visiting Victoria Harbour where we took a ride on the famed Star Ferry. An impressive scenic trip that would've been even better had we taken a boat ride along the same general path at night, from what I understand.

"Well, it depends," I said, pausing to sip chilled lychee wine. "If the coin is there and my offer of fair market price plus twenty percent doesn't woo him, I'll see if I can snag it from his collection and run like hell."

I added a devilish grin. Unfortunately, it did little to alleviate my son's uneasiness.

"In truth, I'll be surprised if the damned thing is in Mr. Cheung's exclusive collection," I continued. "Remember my mention of how I felt drawn away from Hong Kong proper when we prepared to land at the airport? I'd bet everything I'm worth the coin I seek is still inside the cave I dreamt about last night."

"Oh, Pops, please!"

My boy shook his head in irritation. I did everything to hide my own annoyance. Was this a byproduct of his crystal-influenced regeneration? What a shame it would be if I hurled the damned things into Kowloon Bay.

"I'm serious, son," I said, surprised by the edge in my voice. "The steamer chests might contain far more items in terms of artifacts. Perhaps even the mantle mentioned this afternoon by Christian Morrow."

That got his attention. He sat up straight and eyed me expectantly. "You're saying the 'Mantle of Genghis Khan' actually exists?"

"Maybe."

"Sheesh! There's no evidence to support the crazy legends of a 'fiery blast' preceding the arrival of his personal army as he moved throughout Asia Minor," said Alistair, his tone almost pompous in its disdain. "Mere myths created to explain how Khan's armies overran so many Muslim nations with very little loss of Mongol lives. It's enormously embarrassing to the followers of Allah that barbarians easily subdued His chosen ones."

"I can see why you would believe that…to a degree."

But the image in my mind was one I could never adequately convey—to Alistair or

any one else. I thought about the metal vest I saw in my dream. Though it wasn't glowing on its own, the eerie shimmer of light emanating from my coin and reflecting upon it was what rekindled memories of the famous Mongol emperor. The vest in the steamer chest looked damned near identical to the one Khan had worn when we met, that fateful day long ago.

Granted, the cave in my dream was dark, and it was impossible to say for sure if the vest was the *exact* one. But the engraved dragons along both sides were immediately familiar.

While riding the ferry, I searched my mind's archives for clues. Just before we reached the shore, images of Khan and the distinct attire he wore outside Samarkand came to my mind's forefront. The vest had to be the very same one he wore. That alone should make the item highly desirable for a collector like Morrow. But, obviously, there was another reason he was determined to procure it.

Which brings us to another memory. This one deals with what I actually saw eight hundred years ago, after I had put several miles between Samarkand and me. As dusk approached, a loud sizzling crack like lightning striking the ground ahead of a thunderstorm ripped through the air. I glanced over my shoulder and was surprised to see a shimmering purple ring expanding rapidly as it raced toward me.

I immediately dismounted from my horse and brought us both low to the ground, just before this incredible light passed over us. It disappeared an instant later, while a heavy breeze pushed the trees in the area low to the ground. An explosion in the distance behind me followed this—the likes of nothing I had ever witnessed until the dawn of the twentieth century and the experiments of Nikola Tesla. It shook the ground, though the explosion was nothing near as dramatic as Hiroshima. When I returned to the ruins of Samarkand a few months later, however, walls still standing after its surrender were no longer intact. The damage to them and the palace where Ala ad-Din Muhammad's treasure chambers once stood was far greater than any human army equipped with catapults and battering rams could accomplish.

"Are you saying the legend is true?" Alistair grinned playfully, baiting me to give a negative response or face more ridicule.

"As you've seen in your Middle Eastern studies, it's possible for any legend to have some truth imbedded within," I said. "The vest, or mantle, I saw in my dream was the same one Genghis Khan wore the day I met him. Shortly afterward, I experienced a blast similar to Nikola's experiments I once told you about."

"The precursors to Einstein's work?"

That's a whole other can of worms I'll save for a later tale.

"Yes."

"*Ha-ha!* You can't be frigging serious, Pops—I mean, *come on!*"

"Why do you find it impossible to believe your old man has seen a few amazing things and known a few famous people during his extended stay on planet earth?"

"It's not impossible," he said. "It's just that…well, I don't think you're beyond

exaggeration here and there.” He had been chuckling, and it morphed to full laughter.

Great. Just frigging lovely.

It brought an image to mind of when Jesus took us to Nazareth the first time. Despite nearly a week’s worth of miracles performed amongst the town’s populace, no one could get over the fact a ‘local boy’ had found fame elsewhere. Probably the biggest moment of empathy I felt for my Lord, when He walked among us—aside from Golgotha. I felt akin, as well, in the present moment, and to His wise observation that ‘a prophet is not honored in his own country’. Except in my case, it often seemed my entire life’s history was met with similar ridicule. Of course, I, too, had shortsightedness when I later betrayed Him.

At least my kid hasn’t totally dismissed me, he fully believes in my immortality. His block in the eye comes from not being able to picture who I’ve rubbed shoulders with down through the centuries. Guess it’s a good thing I’ve never told him that Roderick, under a different name, was an original signer of the Declaration of Independence. On occasion, he visited George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon, where they assumed he had a fetish for French powder.

Once our dinner arrived, I endured a few more barbs that gradually became more and more lighthearted since I refused to be drawn into a debate. With what looked like a full schedule the next day, we returned to the Royal Garden, intending to retire early. However, when we stepped into our room, I knew our plans for that night and perhaps the next day had been nixed. An old CIA acquaintance sat in a chair by the window overlooking Victoria Harbour. He had pulled the curtains closed and left a single light on, turned to its dimmest setting.

“Hello William and Alistair…. Take a seat.”

The tone brisk, the icy stare was worse. Sam Daniels had a serious bone to pick.

Chapter 10

Alistair sat on the sofa while I closed the door behind us. I turned on the recessed overhead light above the living area and set it to the highest setting—Agent Daniel’s perturbed look notwithstanding.

“Do you truly think a rude intrusion at night will get better cooperation than a more polite meeting scheduled during the daytime?” I told our guest, who kept his right hand near the hidden holster to his cherished Glock beneath his dress coat. Carrying a concealed weapon was probably the only reason he wasn’t dressed casual. “Will Michael or Cedric be joining us, too?”

“Tonight it’s just me,” said Sam. He glanced up at the short row of bright lights I had turned on and pulled out a pack of cigarettes from inside his coat, tapping one out. The pissing contest had officially begun. “Mike’s on the way here from L.A. and should arrive tomorrow afternoon.”

“You should realize smoking isn’t allowed in here,” said Alistair, drawing a look of surprise from both Sam and me. It had never been my son’s habit to address any of the agency’s representatives so casually, and with overt disdain. I guess I wasn’t the only one to feel the brunt from my son’s new brashness. “And, I for one like being able to see you clearly, Agent Daniels.”

Sam glared at Alistair for nearly a minute in silence, while twirling the fresh cancer stick between his fingers. A twelve-year veteran with the CIA, he’d been a career state trooper in Georgia before that time. Not necessarily handsome, Sam’s best feature was his hazel eyes—and it wasn’t saying much. His square jaw and military buzz-cut did little to change the impression he was a boorish asshole.

“Alistair’s got a point,” I offered, quickly tiring of the conflict simmering between them. “Don’t smoke and we’ll listen to what you have to say.”

Now he glared at me…but nodded while returning the cigarette to its previous home.

“We saw you and Alistair with Christian Morrow this afternoon,” he advised. “From what we could tell, you guys are fairly chummy with him—especially Alistair. We shouldn’t have to plead to get you to help us determine what exactly he intends to purchase while he’s here in Hong Kong, and when he plans to deliver whatever this thing is to his Syrian contacts.”

“Michael told me that he believes the mysterious item you’re after is a weapon of some sort,” I said, moving to the sofa and sitting across from Alistair.

“That’s correct,” Agent Daniels confirmed. “It’s something Morrow’s coveted for years. Our techs picked up part of your conversation today. Do you know what this ‘Mantle of Genghis Khan’ is?”

“We only know what you guys know. It’s a very rare item belonging to Khan…if it’s even real.”

Bravo, Ali my boy. A clever dash of deception often works…except Sam Daniels wasn’t buying my son’s answer just yet.

“Are you interested in buying it?”

“No…why would we want something like that?” I tried to sound nonchalant.

“Why else would you be here?”

“It was my idea,” said Alistair. “I always wanted to see Hong Kong. William offered to bring me here as an early retirement present, since I’m unsure as to when, or even if, I’ll return to Georgetown.”

“A vacation that has nothing to do with purchasing anything of value, huh? Especially after visiting the coin convention on successive days…. Are you really content to feed me this load of bull?”

Despite Sam's homicidal stare, his tone remained smooth. Like a carefully aged bottle of the finest Kentucky bourbon.

"Buying coins is a far cry from purchasing a weapon," I said, determined to turn the course of this conversation around before it crashed head-on into an iceberg of nastiness. "Perhaps Michael told you that I do, in fact, enjoy collecting coins. Unless something changed last night while we were sleeping, such activities are completely legal and encouraged in some economies around the world."

I grinned smugly. Sam seemed to be in the mood for a fight. Silly shit, and for what reason? To ruffle some feathers in hopes we'd relent to a twisted obligation to serve the United States once again, by doing something technically illegal—whether it meant taking covert pictures, stealing documents, stalking, etc?

"You can play coy all you want, William, but in the end I *will* find out what you're up to. Hell, if not me, someone else in the agency will do it, and then blow your fragile cover." His tone threateningly, he got up from his chair, taking his first steps toward exiting our suite. "Help us nail this prick by using Alistair's connection to gain his trust."

Well, at least he finally spelled out what he wants…or what the agency wanted.

"What makes you think he'd be impressed enough with Alistair to allow me entrance into his world? Or, is this strictly a mission for him?"

"It's for you, William, since you're the guy who worked for us—*not* Alistair," he said. It begged the question of whether he was talking about my recent reenlistment with the agency, which spanned from a few years before Sam joined the CIA until I told Michael and Cedric to bugger off a few weeks ago. Or, did he have knowledge of my previous affiliations with both the BOI and later the CIA that began near the turn of the *last* century? "But, Alistair gives you the 'in' with Morrow by virtue of him being mentioned by name in a few of Morrow's diaries—while in school at Georgetown, and up until a few years ago. Alistair made quite an impression on him, and your father's philosophy on dealing with hostile cultures—such as in Afghanistan and Syria—have aided Morrow in making the inroads that now put the security of the American people at stake."

Boy, what a mind-fuck this conversation was. 'Screw you, but we need your help.'

"So, by filling in the blanks, you're asking to use my dad's comfort level to do what… sneak into Morrow's hotel room and snoop around for clues as to what he's up to?" I admit, it had become impossible to mask my contempt for a really stupid-sounding assignment. "But Morrow has already explained what he's looking for."

"We don't think it's what he's after, since we're dealing with a man who stands to make nine figures from the Syrian government. At least in American dollars," said Agent Daniels. He moved past the sofa to the door, still eyeing us both disdainfully. "If I were you, I wouldn't wait to get started on this. We need answers in the next couple of days, since our Middle East contacts have told us Morrow plans to meet with his Syrian connections either Friday or Saturday."

"That doesn't give us much time, since the next time we will see Mr. Morrow is tomorrow, Thursday afternoon," said Alistair. "You're expecting us to make the inroads you seek that soon?"

“Yes, I am,” he said. “William has worked with tighter deadlines than this one. Make it happen.”

I didn’t let on as to whether I’d cooperate, or not. However, Alistair’s anxious expression proved effective enough to elicit a smug look from Sam. He stepped out into the hallway and headed for the nearest elevator. He left the damned door wide open, too—like one last disrespectful act for defying him and the government agency I once worked for.

I almost pursued him, but had no idea what I’d say. Other than telling him to bugger off as I recently told his bosses, it was pointless. Hell, my attempts to walk away from the agency had already proved futile, and I had no doubt for the rest of our stay in Hong Kong our every move would be scrutinized. Depressing, really. It was what I thought about as I listened to the chime of the elevator down the hallway and pictured Agent Daniels stepping inside the car and the chime’s bell announcing the door would close again.

That’s what I expected. It wasn’t what happened.

Just as I prepared to close the door to our suite and discuss a new plan of action with my kid, I heard a struggle. It sounded like Agent Daniels was straining for breath as he fought to free himself from someone’s grip. Someone much bigger and more powerful than the six-foot four former state trooper.

“What in the hell’s going on out there?”

“I don’t frigging know—stay right where you are, Ali!”

I knew my son wouldn’t listen, and I rushed to the elevator hidden from direct view. Hidden, I should say, until I stepped around the corner of the short hallway. Alistair was right behind me, as I feared, and gasped when he saw what had caused me to stop cold in my tracks.

Viktor Kaslow stood next to the elevator that had a knife jammed inside the door slot to keep it open. He held Agent Daniels by the throat, and although the agent stood at least an inch taller than the Russian, the tips of Sam’s toes dragged against the hotel’s carpet as Kaslow stepped toward us. Sam’s face had turned deep crimson from lack of air, and he would die very soon if I didn’t quickly think of something.

Kaslow snickered meanly as he watched Alistair’s and my abhorred reactions.

“Hello, William and Alistair,” he said cheerfully, despite the scorn in his eyes. “Have you missed me?”

Chapter 11

“Yours is a face only a mother would miss,” I said. “There’s nothing to gain here by playing games, Viktor.”

Determined to keep my tone even and free of any signs I was scared shitless, my focus was on finding the quickest way to save Agent Daniels’ life. Unfortunately, that likely meant someone else would die in his place. Since I can’t die, and would awaken in some other time and place, Alistair would become the next target. Knowing Kaslow’s penchant for supreme evil, Alistair’s death would be much sweeter for him than my demise anyway.

“Oh, but you are certainly wrong about that, my friend,” he replied. “Maybe we should start with a little contest of ‘strangle the pesky CIA agent’. I believe it would be much more fun than tossing the fucker off a twenty-story building. Wouldn’t you agree, William?”

My blood ran cold, picturing what had happened to James Stewart in Caracas. Kaslow grinned, as if he could also view the horror being played out in my head. His steel blue eyes glowed unnaturally and his face had regenerated further since our recent encounter in South America. His thick blonde hair seemed fuller than before and his body’s musculature appeared far more ripped than when mortal. The power provided by the crystal shard buried in his chest had transformed him into a modern day Superman. Hell, the crystal’s soft green glow emanated from his chest left partially exposed through the open collar of his blue polo shirt. Like kryptonite in reverse.

“This is *not* Sam’s quarrel. It isn’t Alistair’s quarrel either,” I said. Alistair’s legs were quivering as he looked on. “This is strictly between you and me, Viktor.”

“How convenient that would be…if it were true!” He laughed heartily, as if we reminisced as old friends sharing Bolivar cigars and brandy. “But, I hate them all. Everyone who works for your government is an enemy of mine!”

He tightened his grip around Agent Daniels’ throat. Sam’s eyes began to roll back into his head. He was losing consciousness. It turned out to be a good thing, based on what happened next.

“Don’t worry, William. When the police find what’s left of your friend and the man who poses as your father, you’ll be nowhere around, will you?”

My heart froze within my chest, and suddenly my feet felt as if they had just become thousand pound weights.

He knows! Viktor Kaslow knows who I am! Shit…he must know everything! How in the hell is that even possible?!

“Unfortunately, there isn’t time to discuss the marvelous transformation you’ve witnessed in me,” he continued, nonchalantly. “Let’s just say the miracle you see extends far beyond the physical.”

I doubt Alistair was aware of the slight groan escaping his throat. Our mutual terror compounded by the second, and my mind went blank as weakened thoughts raced toward

panic.

“Alistair, *run!”*

Perhaps some would picture me shouting this as an urgent, but controlled, command to my beloved son, holding my chest out like a proud peacock. If only I had been so confident. My voice cracked from emotion.

How clearly Kaslow could read my thoughts would determine whether or not I could come up with something…some heroic scheme. We were completely screwed if he read my thoughts verbatim. Yet, until I knew for certain, I decided to trust my instincts. If I failed to save Sam, I prayed Alistair had the good sense to run until he found his way to the Royal Garden’s main lobby.

I lunged and it was futile—at least in my efforts to save Agent Daniels. My supernatural curse means only that I can’t die physically. As long as the blow isn’t to my brain, heart, or a combination of other vital organs, I will regenerate every damaged tissue in under a minute—two minutes tops. Great for me, but fairly useless against someone whose strength far surpasses that of an Olympic power lifter. All the combat skills I’ve acquired over the years are no match against the Tree of Life’s influence.

Kaslow shoved me and I flew back onto my ass nearly a dozen feet away, where Alistair stood frozen in fear. Agent Daniels no longer struggled to escape his grip.

“Perhaps you would like to see my rendition of Mount Vesuvius’ wrath upon the foolish townsfolk of Pompeii, no?”

He tore off the agent’s head at the shoulders with minimal effort and tossed it inside the empty elevator car. Kaslow pointed the top of the headless corpse at the elevator and covered the entire car with the agent’s blood rush. He squeezed the torso as if trying to get every ounce of blood out. It sickened me further to hear the sound of ruptured organs amid bones splintering inside what used to be my CIA colleague.

I stood up and shoved Alistair forcefully down the hallway, glancing over my shoulder as Kaslow retrieved his knife from the elevator door. For a moment, I thought we might escape. However, Kaslow produced a pair of semi-automatic Steyrs equipped with silencers. An expert marksman, it wasn’t likely he’d miss Alistair. Not unless I mirrored my son’s movements, staying between him and Kaslow’s bullets.

“Run for the stairs, Ali!”

A bullet ripped through my right shoulder, closer to my heart than I’d assumed Kaslow would aim.

“Run! Run like the frightened doe that you are, William, and your fawn!” Kaslow cackled. Less than twenty feet away, his steady footfalls announced he trotted behind us.

Stalking us like a couple of wounded animals! Such a cocky mother….

“There’s the stairs, Pops!”

Alistair’s voice was shrill, but hopeful. He zigzagged, hinting at speed that made him a Scottish soccer star many years ago.

“You’ll *never* get there!” Anger from Kaslow, followed by a volley of shots. Several

bullets struck my legs and pierced my stomach. It suddenly dawned on me that he could paralyze me if he hit my spine. But I could no longer mimic my son's moves. Meanwhile, Kaslow gained on us. His breaths were steady and unlabored.

Such confidence often leads to slight mistakes. Alistair had just reached the stairs when Kaslow slowed up to take fateful aim at my son's back. In the few seconds before the trigger was pulled, I sprinted and dove in front of Alistair, as the bullet that would've killed him tore through my left lung.

That one hurt like a royal mother…but at least my momentum carried my son through the door. I managed to close it with my right hand from behind me. An extra few seconds was all I hoped for. We scrambled down the stairs to the next floor, making it through the door just moments before new bullets came our way.

"Are you hit?" I asked Alistair, as we raced down the hallway to the elevators.

"Not yet," he blurted out between breaths.

A night maid and several guests were mulling about. We startled them as we sprinted by. All the while, I prepared myself for bullet spray coming from behind, but didn't chance a take a peek over my shoulder until we reached the elevators. The night maid was handing extra towels to a guest, and neither one seemed threatened…. Kaslow had not pursued us.

"Should we chance taking the elevator?"

Alistair shook, and I feared a breakdown was on the way. I almost said 'no', and prepared to suggest we take the other stairs further down the hall. But, the doors opened.

The car sat empty, the lighted arrow pointing down.

I urged my son aboard, and heard shrill shrieks from above us as the door closed. Someone had surely stumbled onto Viktor Kaslow's fresh kill. Alistair slumped to his knees and cried.

He cried harder than I've ever witnessed. "There, there, son…we're going to be okay. We've got to move quickly once we reach the main floor,"

"I c-can't…I can't do this anymore!" he sobbed.

"Yes, you can son—I will get us to safety in just a short while. Trust me."

"That's *not* what I mean!" he said, pushing me away as he stood up. We had just passed the second floor and would reach the main floor momentarily. "I can't be *you!* I tried, but it doesn't work!"

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

So far out of left field, he totally lost me as to what he meant.

"I've been trying to be like you for *years!"*

It damned near tore my heart out. I didn't know what to say. But getting to the root of whatever this shit was about would have to wait.

"Hang on, son…I've got to get us out of here."

The elevator chimed for the main level. The lobby bustled with excitement, and a pair of police officers prepared to take our places on the elevator with an anxious looking night manager from the hotel. I stepped out casually, and looked around. No sign of our nemesis…but who could be sure?

“My laptop…I need to go back upstairs and—”

“No, son…I’ll buy you a new one or get someone to come back for it,” I said. “And, whatever I’ve done to upset you, I’ll make it right. We’ll talk about it as soon as it’s safe enough.” I gently urged him to keep up with me to the main entrance.

“When you said you’ll get somebody to come back here for it, did you mean somebody like Roderick?”

“Yes…someone like him.”

He had more questions, but I shushed him. Hard to predict what Kaslow would do with dozens of people coming in and out of the famed hotel. Would he take out the innocent to catch his prize? Once his usual M.O., he was so much worse now.

“There’s a taxi coming up, and it looks empty. We better grab it while the coast is clear.”

Despite an unimpeded path to the hotel curb, it took nearly five minutes to convince Alistair we wouldn’t be cut down like vulnerable college students from a gun tower as we ran to the cab. As a further precaution, I gave the driver enough cash to last at least an hour on the road.

No choice but to find someplace new…someplace safe. Especially after we passed a patron standing in the shadows near the hotel’s parking garage. Dressed in a local Dragonflies baseball jacket and cap, along with dark sunglasses, the man smiled and waved as we drove by.

I didn’t mention it to Alistair. It would only make things worse. Besides, I knew in my heart we’d meet this man again very soon. For as long as we were in Hong Kong, Viktor Kaslow wasn’t going anywhere.

Chapter 12

We ended up at the InterContinental Hotel. A bit pricier than our previous location, but the right choice in eluding Viktor Kaslow, the CIA, and anyone else who might prove to be a threat. Even if for only a short while. My biggest worry was whether or not the hotel

had a vacancy. Fortunately, it did.

And how could I afford such an extravagance, running low on cash and needing to avoid any credit card payments under the names of William and Alistair Barrow?

By no longer being those two individuals.

The inner panel of my billfold holds multiple credit cards and picture IDs for two other aliases of mine. Names I rarely use, one hasn't seen the light of day in more than a decade, and both are tied to substantial resources.

Prudent to forgo a suite this time, and not repeat other preferences from our previous locale, we choose a standard room over the deluxe options. Fortunately, the only other haggling point was getting a room on the third floor as opposed to the twelfth—my pick over my boy's choice. He felt safer higher up, but I wanted something with a more immediate escape route.

Once settled in, I contacted Roderick's cell number. While waiting for him to pick up, I reflected on a troubling conversation I had with Alistair in the taxi.

"I can't do it any more," he said, repeating what he'd told me on our elevator ride down to the Royal Garden's lobby. "I've always wanted to please you, Pops. Maybe it's unfair to you since you've never told me what you expect from me."

"Other than to give your best effort at whatever you do, what else would be fair to ask?" I patted his knee—something I hadn't done since he was a young boy. "I'm proud of everything you've accomplished, but most of all I'm simply proud *you* are my son. I love you, Ali."

"I know you do," he said, sadly. "But, haven't you always secretly wanted me to be like you—to have that tough guy exterior to where nothing bothers you?"

Huh? And here I thought I was one of the softies out there. Too bad Roderick hadn't shared the cab with us. I'm sure he'd find amusement in my boy's opinion.

"I'm not all that tough." I shook my head at how his perception of me drastically differed from how I've pictured myself. "As for a 'tough guy exterior', haven't you noticed how protective I've been of you lately? I worry about your safety, and how you're dealing with your abandoned professorship. I even worry about your fragile heart—I'm talking about the budding love you share with a woman half your age. I don't want *anything* to hurt you."

"Amy doesn't care about the age difference since it's shrinking by the week." He turned to look at me. His eyes filled with tears, and it tore deeper into my heart. What could I do to lift this hidden burden from him? "Her biggest beef with me is that I've become 'edgier' since last summer."

"I've noticed it, too."

"Well, it's me trying to be *you!"*

What in the hell?!

"Seriously?"

“Yeah, Pops, *seriously!”* He wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. “You’re always stern, and when people say something you don’t agree with, you blow them off. If they do it more than once, you belittle them. And yet, people always respect you. I started imitating you about five years ago, and stepped it up when the aging began to reverse, thinking it would be cool to finally act like you without feeling like an old man trying to act young. But, I can’t live with the pressure. It hurts me to say this…even though Viktor Kaslow is a helluva lot meaner than you could ever be, I realized tonight you both lack sensitivity to what it means to be truly human.”

Wow…my son’s condemnation stung deeper than anything said to me since Jesus Christ’s silent accusation, as I watched Him whipped and beaten shortly after I accepted the price on His head. Too stunned to react, for a moment I ceased to breathe…as if finally I’d lose the very will to live. Here I thought the crystals were turning my son into an ass, when he simply wanted to be like his dear old dad.

Did I believe this was a fair evaluation of my demeanor? Not really…until I considered how most people react to me. I don’t keep many friends, other than those who are more than a century old. As I paused to think more about it, I suddenly saw a host of cringing faces parade before my mind’s eye. Perhaps there was something to this. Perhaps….

“I’m sorry son. I had no idea.”

“It’s okay, Pops,” he assured me, as if suddenly feeling guilty. “You can’t help what your personality has become. Two thousand years means a guy’s pretty set in his ways.”

“I’ll work on it, son—I *really* will.” Despite the pain in hearing what he told me, I decided to embrace it. He smiled, and I returned his with my own, silently praying it would be *my* first step in learning to be more like him….

“William? It’s about time you called me!” Roderick had just answered my call. If his phone had rung much longer, I would’ve hung up. “What in the hell happened tonight?”

“Kaslow killed Sam.”

Alistair had just turned on the TV and was busy looking for the latest news reports. He looked sharply in my direction when I mentioned Agent Daniels’ murder.

“I’m aware of that fact,” said Roderick, coolly. He was irritated. I got the queer feeling his annoyance wasn’t directed at me. Something else drew his displeasure. “Lucky for you and Alistair, the police have been instructed to treat this as a tragic elevator accident. The hotel will be cleared of all negligence in the end, and the elevator manufacturer and maintenance contractor will escape scrutiny beyond the initial media investigation into the accident.”

“And, everyone’s palms will be heavily greased, eh?”

“Be careful, William, of biting *any* of the hands that have fed you well for many years,” he said, and this time his ire was directed at me…although less harshly than it could’ve been. “It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that a former CIA operative turned rogue has finally gotten his revenge against a former colleague in the agency he butted heads with on a regular basis.”

Who, moi?

“I sort of see your point. So, what happens next?”

“Where are you?”

“You mean Oz the Great hasn’t figured it out yet?”

“Give them another hour, and perhaps they will,” chuckled Roderick. His tone warmed a few degrees. “Christian Morrow and his hired hit man might find your new hideout sooner.”

Any allusion to Viktor Kaslow carried the most weight at present. How could I not come clean, especially considering my biggest ally was on the other end of the line?

“We’re at the InterContinental, Room 306,” I said, praying our longtime friendship was still as strong as it had been one hundred years ago. “We were forced to leave our belongings at the Royal Garden.”

“I’ve already taken care of that, and you’ll have your bags delivered in the next few hours,” he said. “They’ll pass through several hands before making it to the InterContinuental. I’m sure you understand how careful both of us must be at the present time.”

“You won’t be accompanying their delivery?”

“It’s better to stay apart until the smoke clears.”

It’s the way things have always been handled between us. Separation that could sometimes mean years, decades, or even centuries was often necessary to maintain anonymity.

“Michael is joining Cedric on a flight from Yokohama tonight,” Roderick continued. “They are looking for a quick resolution to the Morrow problem.”

“And?”

“They also intend to resolve the growing conflict between you and Kaslow.” His voice grew softer and solemn. “Be careful, William.”

“Just spit it out, Roderick!” I hated the coyness, and I wasn’t about to let it replace the straight honesty we’ve always addressed each other with. “Don’t be like them.”

“All right.” He released a low sigh. “You have caused them enough embarrassment to where they no longer care if you live or die. In fact, they no longer care if you take out Kaslow or not—they want you both out of the picture.”

“They want me dead?”

“If they can find a clean way to do it…yes.”

That was comforting. All cynicism aside, my immediate worry turned to Alistair’s welfare.

“I won’t let them hurt Ali,” I told him, evenly. “Even if it means I won’t see either of you again for some time, or even my beloved Beatrice again in this lifetime. As long as I feel my son’s life is in danger, I will kill them all. You know I can do it, so this is no idle

threat…and not to you, but to—”

“Them. Yes I know,” he said, interrupting me. “Perhaps you would kill them all in a single night—like Louis the Sixteenth’s personal guards the night before his arrest. I remember that night very well. Yes, you could do it again…but what purpose would it serve? What would it accomplish, since everyone in the United States government is completely replaceable? Things are not as they once were.”

You would have to look past the face value of Roderick’s statements to catch his true meaning, delivered more by his vocal inflections than the words themselves. The bottom line was that the CIA—or some other federal institution with international tentacles stretching easily to Hong Kong—would eliminate whatever obstacles were in the way to stopping Christian Morrow. Viktor Kaslow, Roderick, myself, or any other immortal could only delay the U.S.A.’s objective. In the end, they would win. They always did.

But they might be missing a few field people and their supervisors to boot.

“So, is it a foregone conclusion that Michael and Cedric will seek to kill me?”

“No…but it’s a serious consideration coming to them from the highest levels in Washington.”

“The older families never know when to stop!” I said, disgustedly. “How do they propose to get to Christian Morrow with the equivalent of Spawn protecting his back? A squad of Navy Seals would be mere fodder for this one…I haven’t seen anything like him since Drakul.”

“True…he has already killed two seal teams earlier this year, when they were sent to intercept him in Afghanistan.”

Well, this was news. And, here I thought I was the guy to blow the very first whistle on our Russian immortal’s murderous activities. He must’ve gotten a head start right after Christmas.

“Yes, my friend, I thought your advisory was the first as well,” he said, sadly. “You may be the best candidate to get to Morrow, since he admires your boy. I’ll continue to play that angle with my Washington contacts, and with Cedric and Michael.”

“I appreciate it, Roderick,” I said, restraining my anger about being dragged into this shit storm. “I’ll always have your back, Roderick, and will forever cherish our shared Celtic cross of blood. As for Michael and Cedric, they’d do well to watch their backs going forward.”

I half expected for him to offer one last defense on their behalf, but he refrained. Instead, he stated he would see what he could do for Alistair and me, and would keep our present whereabouts a secret until we spoke again. Then he hung up.

* * *

There wasn’t time to sulk. To protect my son, I gave him a bullshit answer instead of the truth from Roderick. Not a great way to ingratiate myself into my boy’s desire for

better honesty between us; however, keeping him alive meant a helluva lot more.

Taking care of things while revealing as little as possible to Alistair wasn't exactly an easy deal since some of our luggage never made it to our new lodgings that night. Roderick sent me a message advising there were unforeseen complications, and I'd be given information before morning. At least Alistair's personal computer was delivered, so it provided him with a distraction while I left to get us some clothes and other odds and ends we needed for the rest of our stay. When I returned to our room around ten o'clock, he was fast asleep, having believed my earlier promise we'd be fine and that Roderick had shared great news with me.

I watched him sleep. Not all that different from when he was a young lad more than half a century earlier. Just like those older times, he was dependent on me to protect him from all harm.

It was the only thing I thought about as I waited for the dawn's light, and the promise of an uncertain Thursday.

Chapter 13

Cheung Sulyn arranged for a limousine to pick us up from the hotel. She had insisted on the arrangement after speaking with Alistair for nearly an hour the night before. I'll admit to some surprise—at both the fancy ride to the Adventist Hospital and the fact my kid was in the mood to chat for so long after watching Agent Daniels being used as a human plastic ketchup bottle. Then again, the lovely charms of Ms. Cheung may have been exactly what Alistair needed to regain a balanced perspective on things.

"So, where exactly are we supposed to meet Sulyn?"

I had just glanced at my watch, noting the time was 7:47 a.m. According to my son, it would take us roughly twenty minutes to navigate traffic to reach the hospital. From there, Sulyn and her grandfather's security detail would escort us to his private room. That should give us a few minutes to spare for our scheduled eight-thirty meeting with the patriarch of the Cheung fortune.

"She said she would wait for us by the side entrance, where a private elevator will take us up to her grandfather's room," advised Alistair, glancing nervously toward the crowded sidewalks beneath towering buildings as we drove by. As if he expected Viktor Kaslow to suddenly appear somewhere in the throng. "We'll have about an hour to visit with him."

"Conversing with two strangers…sounds like it could be fun," I said, drawing an immediate look of scorn from my boy. Another clue to watch my tone. "Seriously, it might

not be too bad. At least for you, since you will be the celebrity today. You should loosen up and have some fun with it, Ali."

I offered a smile, but his expression made me realize I had a long way to go in order to lessen the impact of my sarcasm.

"I'd have the most fun listening to you speak in a version of Cantonese that Cheung Yung-ching might recognize," he said, grinning impishly.

"What?! Are you insinuating Yung-ching might not be able to keep up with the older dialects?"

"Actually, I believe he'll be fine," said Alistair. "It's *you* I'm worried about. Lord knows you like to fill in the blanks with words that have never existed in *any* Chinese dialect. Now, if he has a good understanding of ancient Persian, or Yiddish and classical Sanskrit, then perhaps he will easily follow the trail of horseshit spewing from your mouth."

"Ali!"

"I'm just teasing, Pops. Really, you need to smile more often. Remember we're merely visiting with one of Hong Kong's most reclusive natives. It's not a frigging wake!"

My boy was beginning to give me a complex. Not to brag, but I carry a reputation as being one of the immortal world's best at the art of social skills and ingratiating one's self with strangers. I've never lacked for charm—even Alistair acknowledged that fact yesterday. However, it seems when my charisma is not in active employment, I'm as comely as a fang-bearing serpent. And, I don't mean the silver-tongued variety. Too late for charm school, my only immediate recourse is to rely on my kid's take as to whether I'm winning friends or making enemies.

"This must be it, huh?"

We pulled up to a small entrance just beyond the Emergency Room.

"As far as I can tell, it is," he said, and pointed to Cheung Sulyn and two stoutly built men standing near the doorway. "It looks like they're ready for us."

Indeed. No sooner than we exited the limousine, the men left Sulyn's side to greet us. Well, it was more like urging us to get our asses moving. We didn't stop until we had stepped into the elevator taking us upstairs to Cheung Yung-ching's private room.

"I'm glad you were able to do this today, after what happened last night," said Sulyn. "Alistair told me that you had met with the American who was killed in the accident, and he was a long time acquaintance of yours, William. I am sorry for your loss."

I hoped this was all Alistair revealed. He's been charmed by a beautiful woman before, as recent as last year when we first met Amy Golden Eagle. He gave out sensitive information about me to her within a day of their introduction, long before they fell in love.

"Thank you, Sulyn, for your concern," I said, shifting my gaze to the elevator door. We had just arrived on the fifth floor. "Sam will be missed."

Well, it's true. Even though we got on each other's nerves, the CIA would seem a lot

louder without Agent Daniels' abrasiveness to keep everyone around him in check. Of course, I no longer worked there, so I won't be missing him as much as those who shared a cup of coffee with him first thing in the morning.

She nodded respectfully to us as the elevator doors opened, and we stepped out into a long hallway. It occurred to me that she hadn't introduced her muscular companions, which made things a little awkward as she locked her arm inside Alistair's and the pair led the way to Cheung Yung-ching's room. Her escorts seemed as reluctant as me to strike up a conversation. At least the view I was afforded made up for the lack of discourse. As opposed to the two men guarding Sulyn, who were dressed in black from head to toe, she was dressed in a smart business skirt ensemble that was still colorful enough to please the male eye.

My playing days are long over, and my present admirations would never venture beyond casual. I simply like this woman's taste and the way she carries herself. In fact, those who enjoyed my earlier physical descriptions of this lovely lady will have to let those suffice. Other than having her hair pulled back away from her lovely neck and wearing lipstick a shade darker than what she donned yesterday. She would make a marvelous catch for the vast majority of young men with a pulse, and perhaps my son in a few months when he is thirty-ish, if not for the fact he's already attached to someone else.

Her grandfather's room was obvious. A pair of casually dressed guards guarded the entrance, and both were packing serious heat. The abode for a man who had much to fear —even in old age.

The guards stepped aside and all five of us entered the room. In actuality, it was two rooms physically altered to pose as one large room. Four more guards stood at attention throughout the room, and Cheung Yung-ching was sitting up in his hospital bed, an IV tube attached to his left arm.

Despite Sulyn's advisement yesterday, Cheung appeared to be in pretty decent shape for a man in his late seventies. But, he would be gone soon…the aroma of death grew stronger as we approached his bedside.

"Wait here for just a moment," said Sulyn, as she pulled away from Alistair. "He has been expecting you both, but the medication he takes sometimes makes him forget."

There was pain in her tone—more than what her eyes let on. She greatly loved her grandfather, and I found myself admiring her more for wanting to brighten her grandfather's waning hours upon this earth with Alistair's presence.

She stepped over to his bedside, and when he nodded to her, she bowed slightly. She pointed to a small stack of books upon his nightstand and motioned to my son. Cheung's expression had been neutral except for a slight smile when he recognized her. That expression grew brighter as he nodded at Alistair.

Sulyn and Yung-ching spoke for about a minute in Cantonese. I'm assuming this, since I could make out most of the words from the dialect's older predecessors. I ascertained much of the conversation was about Alistair and his books, but Sulyn also said something about viewing the collection mentioned in Christian Morrow's presence the previous afternoon. To this latter information, he nodded thoughtfully, and his expression became

serious.

I'm sure that all of this looked confusing to my son, who glanced worriedly at me when the elder Cheung's facial expression changed. However, once Sulyn motioned warmly for him to come join her by her grandfather's bedside, Alistair grinned sheepishly.

"Wish me luck, Pops," he whispered, and joined Sulyn, who had picked up the first hardcover for him to autograph.

"Just don't write anything that will get us shot, kiddo," I teased, keeping my voice low to where only he would hear me.

That was the intent, but two of the guards closest to us cracked slight smiles. How foolishly arrogant of me to assume their stoic silence indicated weak English comprehension skills!

Alistair signed all four volumes, and I was especially proud he remembered to hand each book to the old man with both hands, per Chinese custom. After the excitement of having books personally signed by my son subsided, I worried we'd be ushered out of Mr. Cheung's presence, and any knowledge he might have about my coin's whereabouts would remain a mystery. Of course, I didn't intend to let that happen. But traditions carry far more weight in other countries than in America. I'd have to carefully pick my moment to speak up. If not for Sulyn, I might still be waiting.

Smart women always seem to have keen intuitions. As Alistair prepared to return where I stood, Sulyn studied me. Wearing the slightest of smiles, she addressed her grandfather once again. This time I couldn't make out any of the words spoken, but her words seemed to have a bigger impact on him than their earlier conversation. His countenance quickly turned dark.

Sulyn looked at me wearing a similar expression.

"Alistair told me that you seek a silver shekel different from the ones you viewed yesterday. Cheung Yung-ching says he might know the coin you speak of."

My heart suddenly lurched into my throat, followed by a suspicious glance at my son.

"Honestly, it's all I said about it, Pops, that the shekel is unusual and carries a unique history," he advised. "Sulyn said she's heard rumors of such a coin growing up, although no one would say much about it. Other than it's belonged to their family as an ancient heirloom and is stored in a secret place with other 'cursed' items."

"What is Mr. Cheung willing to tell me about it?" I asked this question as calmly as I could, despite my immediate excitement. I wished Alistair hadn't withheld this information from me. I would've had time to formulate excellent questions for Mr. Cheung to pinpoint my coin's exact location, instead of trying to think off the cuff.

"My grandfather has a question for you before he will tell you anything about the coin," she replied, demurely, as if she didn't prefer the middleman role thrust upon her. "May I proceed?"

"Sure…I'm game."

"His question is 'why do you desire a coin that is tainted by sacred blood?'"

Well, at least I now had a better understanding of why she looked uncomfortable. Navigating a potential minefield might be an easier proposition. Alistair looked pained, as if he expected me to suddenly reveal I am Judas Iscariot, who caused the damned thing to become cursed in the first place.

It sure as hell wasn't how I intended to handle this.

"I collect these particular coins, and am fully aware of the curses that follow them," I said, careful to avoid self-incriminating facts. "While yours is certainly one with a terrible history, I have collected similar coins leaving bloodier trails."

Sulyn related my answer to her grandfather. He turned to me, motioning for me to come nearer to him. The closer I came, the more I sensed the man's frailty, and an invisible cloud of regret hung over his person.

"What you seek is not good," he said, his English affected by his near exclusive reliance on Cantonese.

I glanced at Sulyn and my boy. Alistair seemed as amazed as me, while Sulyn looked ashamed, as if her grandfather had just betrayed her by revealing he could speak English. Hell, everyone in the room probably spoke the Yankee language just fine.

"I know," I told him, nodding respectfully. "But, I'm uniquely qualified to take the coin out of circulation permanently, to where it can no longer hurt anyone."

He nodded respectfully in return, and motioned for the guards closest to him to help position his body so he could better converse with me. His illness left him incredibly weak, despite a fiery will emanating from him.

"The blood shekel is the name Genghis Khan gave to the coin when it was left behind in a city of conquest," he continued, his voice and English getting clearer, as if he were shaking off the rust from non use. "The daughter of a Mongol Queen brought it into my family, and my ancestors have learned to fear its wrath. No one has dared to destroy it, since the curse gets worse. The coin always comes back to us…."

His voice trailed off, as if he could see the terrible events that had plagued his family since the thirteenth century.

"Once it's back in my possession, it can no longer hurt anyone else." I said this with confidence and with compassion. I may often come across as an ass, but I do possess a heart that cares. My very soul ached for his family's ongoing suffering that started with my own misdeed.

"So, this is your coin?"

"Yes, it is."

"You are the one…. You are the one the legend speaks of?"

"What legend is that?"

Mr. Cheung motioned for his guards to leave the room, and appeared ready to send his granddaughter and my boy with them. But, then he changed his mind and let our kin remain in the room.

“It is a legend that has been in my family for hundreds of years,” he said. “My great grandfather told me as a young man there are certain items that must be kept with us and yet hidden from the world until the end times. If we keep them safe, then all is well with us. If, however, we fail to keep them hidden and safe, that generation will suffer tragedies without end.”

He paused to make sure I followed him. We were all enraptured by his words, and I got the feeling he was just warming up.

“When I was a young boy, my grandfather was very powerful in Hong Kong,” he continued. “But, his house was robbed, and the secret chest that held the cursed items was stolen. My family was terrified—even after all the items mysteriously reappeared in our home. That year, my sister died when she fell off a boat in Kowloon Bay. Her body was never found. Later that same year, my grandmother was killed while watching a knife-throwing exhibition. The knife that killed her bounced off the stage and landed between her eyes.

“It wasn’t until World War II started that my family escaped the curse. Trying to make sure the chest was protected from theft when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, it ended up in a small cave on one of the surrounding islands. All but one of my grandfather’s servants perished, along with the Japanese soldiers who followed them to this cave. The one servant who survived said he watched the earth swallow the living and the dead along with the cursed chest. From that day forward, my family prospered without incident.”

Quite a story, but Mr. Cheung left out the parts where he had people murdered. Maybe it was still a happy ending for him, but it didn’t seem like such a grand deal for the folks who stood in his way.

“That’s really interesting, Mr. Cheung,” I said, hoping I didn’t come across as sarcastic. “But what did you mean by stating a legend foretold of my arrival into this drama?”

I probably should’ve stuck to basic English without the slang, since he eyed me curiously.

“The Mongol Queen, Mandukhai, once told the story of a man who briefly befriended Genghis Khan, and left him with the coin. The man had promised to return for it, but never did. Genghis believed the man must have died in battle…and, yet, still believed the man’s eternal spirit would return for the coin, and any other items contaminated by its presence. It was during Mandukhai’s reign that all of the items were placed in a chest to forever be protected.”

“And, that’s how it got from Asia-Minor or Mongolia to Hong Kong?”

“Yes, William, it is,” he replied, studying me as if trying to gauge how much of this story I believed. “Many of us in Hong Kong believe in reincarnation, and that we continue our passions in a new life, to develop spiritually. My family believes this is true. Is it so hard to believe the only person I have ever heard of having a passion for this blood coin—standing before me today—might have reincarnated to collect the cursed item that once was his to begin with?”

If I were like most people, I’d surely say, “Hell, yeah, it’s damned hard to believe!”

But, in truth, is this that far off from the truth? Granted, I'm not reincarnated…but I do spend every waking moment trying to collect all of my blood coins.

"I'm not sure," I said. "But, I strive to collect them all. So, if believing in reincarnation will make you feel better about me as the guy desperately trying to locate these wretched coins, then count me in."

Alistair's abhorred expression right after I said this was truly priceless. Payback for not giving me a heads up on the Cheung family history as it relates to tainted silver shekels.

"There is one other thing to consider," said Mr. Cheung, nodding thoughtfully after I gave my tepid agreement to take the coin off of his hands. "Taking the coin means you must take everything else, too."

"Everything else?"

"Everything inside the chest," he explained. "There are necklaces, pendants, and even a sheathed golden dagger. The most important thing other than the ring is a combat vest belonging to Genghis Khan."

"The Mantle of Genghis Khan?"

"You have heard of this armor piece?" Cheung seemed genuinely surprised.

"Not until yesterday," I said, glancing at Sulyn and my son again. A white lie I hoped Alistair would accept for the time being. "A man named Christian Morrow is here looking for it. He's probably willing to pay a lot of money, too. Maybe you should consider him, and let me deal with the coin's craziness."

Yes, I can almost hear the 'yellow-belly traitor' accusations out there. Letting Christian Morrow have his treasured relic and watch him destroy the world as we know it. Right? Not necessarily. Most cursed objects tend to backfire when used for further evil. And, that's not just movie hype. Plenty of stories in recorded history support the notion.

"I have heard of this man, Morrow," he confessed. "But, I do not wish to deal with him, since our curse will likely remain. I will only deal with you, William."

"Well, if you don't mind me asking, Mr. Cheung, how difficult will it be to retrieve all of the cursed items from where they are presently stored or hidden?"

Alistair had given us his rapt attention, and Cheung didn't take offense to his sudden presence in our conversation. Of course, the man is also an acknowledged fan of my kid's history books.

"They are in a hidden cave nearly impossible to detect because it is in plain view as something else."

Ah, a riddle and a mystery. How Holy Grail of you, Cheung Yung-ching.

"Can you direct us to this place?" I thought about the map Morrow had mentioned yesterday. Meanwhile, the old man's eyes had begun to flutter, and I feared we exhausted him. I looked at Sulyn, and she seemed to notice the same thing. "Maybe we should continue this discussion at a later time."

I hated suggesting this, and I could thank my son's guilt trip from yesterday. But, I

made a promise to myself and to The Almighty at sunrise that morning to work a helluva lot harder to place others before me. Mr. Cheung might be dying, but I wanted him to be here as long as he could for his granddaughter's sake. Even if it meant not asking a few more critical questions. It certainly was cruel to be kind, but at least the pain of what it might cost me brought a feeling of peace.

The right decision. But not the one he wanted to make.

"I have never seen the place," he said, after allowing Sulyn to adjust his pillow so he could lie back against it. He smiled lovingly at her, and she looked as if she might cry at any moment. "No one has visited there since the war, and we have been blessed by relative peace for almost seventy years. However, there is a map. It is hidden in my safe."

"The one in your estate?" Sulyn massaged his right arm and shoulder, awaiting his response to her question.

"No, it isn't that one," he replied. His eyes were closing, and I knew he'd soon succumb to sleep. "It is in my brother's former office, near the warehouses downtown. We never sold it after Yung-fa died last year. The safe is in the closet near his desk. The combination is our birthdates—the same month is only used once…."

That was all Cheung Yung-ching told us before losing consciousness. On the way downstairs, Sulyn advised us that her grandfather was rarely as lucid these days. The treatments to hold off the advances of prostate cancer had failed, and it was only a matter of time before he crossed the veil to join his siblings and their ancestors.

The information we got from him that morning was much more than we could've reasonably expected from a man in his condition. Hopefully, it kept us one step ahead of Christian Morrow, Viktor Kaslow, and anyone with a death wish from the CIA.

Chapter 14

We spent much of the day with Ms. Cheung. The morning meeting with her grandfather had left us all uneasy. Some of what Cheung Yung-ching had revealed from his hospital bed was familiar to Sulyn, as evidenced in her eyes and facial expressions. Yet, other things he spoke of seemed to stretch her ability to believe it all. Certainly she had grown up listening to family history that was as frightening as it was fascinating… even if she thought much of it was fabricated.

Since Sulyn wasn't scheduled to return to her job at the Exhibition and Convention Centre until the afternoon, and it wasn't quite 9:30 a.m. yet, I suggested she show us the sights the locals favored. I had some idea of what was relevant to Hong Kong natives from my visits during the past several centuries. But, my absences between those visitations

often spanned several decades, or even longer. Sometimes entire generations had disappeared between my trips to this region of the world. Not to mention, my last visit had been more than one hundred years ago—long before any of the current citizenry were born.

Sulyn turned out to be a fabulous tour guide, and she seemed to truly enjoy taking us to her childhood haunts along the city's outskirts. Alistair smiled ear to ear—both from her slightly flirtatious attentions and the fact he received a better taste of Hong Kong than he would've gotten had we explored the city on our own.

We ate lunch at the famed Café Grey, where I must say the seafood was as enjoyable as anything I've tasted abroad, lately. Sipping cocktails, we learned much more about our new friend than I expected. It started with an almost trite question from my boy, about what it was like growing up in a family requiring bodyguards twenty-four/seven.

"It wasn't easy…and the only friends I had until I entered college were from families chosen as acceptable to my parents," she told us, staring off absently at Victoria Harbour. I doubt she even noticed the ships preparing to port. "I almost moved to the United States, and had a scholarship offer from U.C.L.A."

"It sounds to me like you may have some regrets in not pursuing that opportunity," I said, pausing to sip from my first bourbon on the rocks in nearly a month. "What kept you from going?"

"My mother and father were gunned down while riding the ferry across the harbor." Her voice sounded hollow, as if the vivacious spirit of this lovely woman had been suddenly sucked out of her body. "It happened that summer…. We don't have near as many violent crimes as you do in the States, and I knew without my grandfather telling me that it was a contract killing. I've since learned it happened in retaliation for something Cheung Yung-ching did many years ago."

"I'm so sorry to hear this," said Alistair.

I murmured the same thing. She nodded as tears filled her eyes.

“It’s okay…you are among friends,” he said, gently. “Friends who have seen the worst wickedness the world can offer. But, also the good—such as a beautiful soul as yourself.”

“I have a younger brother, and he managed to break away from this place,” she said, when able to continue. She tried to smile. “He’s studying architecture in Hawaii.”

“Not a bad way to go for a young man,” I said, raising my glass in salute. “I can tell you are quite fond of him.”

“Yes…I really miss him.”

I thought those would be the words that led us back down the unhappy trail. But, Sulyn remained upbeat for the rest of our visit—which lasted until it was time to return to the coin convention. She especially enjoyed hearing stories about my beloved Beatrice, and as told by Alistair, since I missed being around during his later formative years. My heart ached for that missed opportunity—especially as my boy related how his mother would make him laugh and lift his spirits when things didn’t go as well as he would’ve liked during secondary school in Glasgow.

I prayed silently the miracle happening for my son would soon replicate itself in Beatrice. I’d gladly wait centuries—if that’s what it took—for her to look at me as she once did, and to be the lovely young woman again that I’d deserted so long ago.

Shallow. I see it now, although it had been a way of emotional survival that had served me well for centuries. I guess it goes to show I was never truly in love until I met Beatrice. Perhaps the greatest mercy I could’ve offered her was to turn around and walk out of that crowded, post-war pub in Glasgow before she and I locked eyes and I said hello….

“Son, are you ready to go?”

Alistair shook me from my downward spiral, and Sulyn looked on compassionately. If not for Amy Golden Eagle’s hold on my boy’s heart, they’d make an intriguing pair that could be a great looking couple in just a few more months of age regression for Alistair. I smiled at the thought he certainly wouldn’t be calling me ‘son’ in public for much longer.

“Yeah…bottoms up.” I downed the rest of my bourbon.

I needed the kick to forget about the past I couldn’t change, and prepare for what the near future held. Christian Morrow would be gracing us with his vile presence very soon. Would Viktor Kaslow follow with an encore performance?

I shuddered as we stepped out into the sunshine and our waiting limousine. If Kaslow was lying in wait for our arrival at the convention, at least we’d go out in style.

Yeah, bad joke. It wasn’t funny to me either.

Thankfully, when we arrived at Sulyn’s place of employment, I didn’t sense danger. Despite Kaslow’s recent surprise visit the other night, I remained confident my survival instincts would give me a heads-up if serious peril was in the air. I detected nothing—at least not a predatory scent as we stepped out of the limo and entered the building.

“You’re late!”

Christian Morrow tapped his diamond-studded Rolex while acting like an impertinent

asshole. He needed to be taught several lessons in humility and kindness, and I'd gladly volunteer to do it if I thought that shit would take to his stubborn soul. But arrogant idiots like him were best suited for the trash-heap.

I glanced at my watch and looked up at the much bigger timepiece on the wall. We were less than two minutes behind schedule.

"She isn't late, mister," I said, which drew an immediate worried look from my boy. "Sulyn had something important to take care of for me and my dad first. Hopefully, that's not too big an issue for you."

Yes, it did make me feel a little better. All in all, I thought it was a fine job of getting this jerk to back off. Of course, if my so-called 'dad' had been anyone other than someone he esteemed as important, this little exercise would've likely worsened things. Morrow gave me a slightly dirty look and nodded to Alistair in a semi-friendly manner. No real harm done, though he didn't bother to regard Sulyn…at least not until she addressed him.

"Follow me to where we convened yesterday," she told him, and then motioned for us to come along again. Morrow didn't put up a fuss this time. "The remaining collection you inquired about yesterday afternoon has already been delivered, and the cases are set up."

We followed her across the open hall to the boardroom. Mr. Lao waited for us, looking almost as surly as Morrow.

"Everything is ready for your viewing," said Lao, quietly. He offered a slight bow to Morrow and to Alistair, and might've done the same for me if not for our 'male debutante' brushing by him as if he wasn't there.

"This is everything?" Morrow acted supremely disappointed despite the presence of seven glassed cases carefully positioned along the length of the cherry table dominating the room. Yet, I sensed he fully expected to find this arrangement to look exactly as it did.

"It is the rest of what my grandfather is willing to share for viewing," said Sulyn, with a little more sternness than I expected. Her boss seemed taken aback, as if he'd be left alone to sooth Morrow's ruffled feathers.

"Where are the Mongolian items?" Morrow moved casually from case to case, paying little attention to any of the cases' contents. "Other than common money pieces and the artifacts from yesterday, I see very little that speaks to what *should* be here. Do you always treat the world's more esteemed collectors with such shabbiness?"

Careful, jackass…. It wouldn't take much to take those patent leather Testonis and shove them far enough down your throat to where a call to Kaslow would remain a muffled whisper forevermore.

"On the contrary, Mr. Morrow, we have taken great pains to show you nearly three hundred coins unseen outside my family's walls in more than a century," she said, her tone cool but professional. "However, if you would rather rejoin the rest of the convention, I will be more than happy to immediately return these items to my grandfather's estate.

For a moment, he looked like he might ask her to do just that. But then he hesitated, snickering softly. "Give me a moment to take a closer look…in case I missed anything of interest."

Moving around the table, he paused to study a particular item or two. When he returned to where she stood, he regarded her with more hostility than before.

“I want you to deliver a message to your grandfather, if you would be so kind,” he said, his lifeless tone undermining the positive inferences of his words. “I want to see whatever he has available that pertains *personally* to Genghis Khan. Am I clear?”

Sulyn said nothing, but accepted Morrow’s business card. He turned and offered another respectful nod to Alistair before walking out of the room without acknowledging anyone else. Lao’s complexion had turned almost as ashen as Alistair’s skin tone in midwinter.

“I’ll be expecting Cheung Yung-ching’s call this evening,” Morrow called over his shoulder. He strolled casually across the hall. I wondered how long it would be before Kaslow showed up at the Exhibition and Convention Centre to pull a Valentine’s Day massacre.

“What a charmer that young man has become,” observed Alistair, shaking his head. “He wasn’t like that when I knew him during his time at Georgetown. I remember him stating once that while he wanted to please his father, he didn’t want to be anything like him.”

“My, how time has changed that perspective,” I deadpanned. “He’s a lot like his dad, from what I’ve read about Jeremiah Morrow. Most of us, it seems, are destined to be like our parents. But, in his case, I’d hardly expect him to want to leave this life before he’s forty, which seems destined.”

“Do you need our assistance in getting this stuff back to your grandfather?” asked Alistair, moving over to the glass case closest to him. “This doesn’t have to be a complete waste of time. In fact, I see some items here that I’d be honored to have a closer look at.”

It was the perfect response to lift Sulyn’s spirits, and for much of the next two hours, she and he discussed the items in each glassed case in the room. Mr. Lao, meanwhile, excused himself to oversee other business in the convention center. Content to stand back while they enjoyed each other’s company, I kept my eyes, ears, and intuitions alert for the emergence of a certain Russian menace that certainly knew by now where we were.

Chapter 15

“Don’t worry, they should be here at any moment,” said Sulyn.

It was after dinner and the three of us waited in a deserted parking lot for her personal

guards to arrive. A poorly lit and crumbling parking lot, I should say, and located in one of the seedier Hong Kong neighborhoods. The shipping warehouse Cheung Yung-ching had mentioned earlier that day stood ominously before us, like a malevolent sentinel sworn to protect its darkest secrets.

It occurred to me that it would've been prudent to find out exactly when Cheung's brother ceased coming to this place. Especially if Yung-fa was as frail as Yung-ching before he died. He might not have conducted business at this address in many years.

For the moment, I wasn't as worried about Kaslow ambushing us as I was about the ancient floorboards giving way. Sulyn had advised the office sat on the top floor of five. But, without obvious signs of electricity, we'd scale the stairs in darkness. Not a significant problem for my eyes, which have operated in dimness for many years. However, worrying about anyone else's safety, while keeping an eye out for an assassin's laser sight beam escalated the risk factor.

"Will your guards be bringing flashlights?"

I tried not to come across as abrasive, but sitting in front of a dilapidated building in a bad neighborhood, where even the locals knew better than to venture onto a deserted street, was asinine. No streetlights either. Just our fancy limousine idling while we awaited reinforcements to keep the city's hoodlums at bay. We might soon be General Custer and his Seventh Calvary waiting for help on Last Stand Hill.

"Here they come," Sulyn advised, as a pair of headlights appeared at the end of a long row of empty buildings. "They should have everything we'll need. If they don't, I'll send someone to get it while we wait."

Her eyes twinkled with excitement. Alistair seemed to be looking forward to what lay ahead, as well. Here I thought it would be just me with the butterflies, since I was getting closer and closer to retrieving my coin from its hiding place. Even so, I couldn't shake the feeling we should be proceeding with more caution, or not at all, before daylight.

When the silver late model Lexus pulled up next to us, it appeared Cheung Yung-ching had sent his fiercest guards. Sulyn leaned over the front seat and advised the limousine driver something undecipherable to me. The driver, a young man who looked barely old enough to chauffeur a car like this one, nodded in response. He removed something wrapped in dark cloth from the glove box and set it next to his lap. She smiled at him before exiting the car with Alistair and myself following close behind her.

Moments before I joined everyone in the eroded parking area, I noticed a small Glock peering out from under the cloth. A larger risk factor to this little trek than our hostess would freely admit, Sulyn averted my probing gaze by asking her guards to produce their flashlights. Two powerful halogens no bigger than any of our pinkies reflected near-blinding beams off the building's dingy windows.

"It has been awhile, but I can lead us to Cheung Yung-fa's office," said Sulyn, as we headed up the short flight of crumbling cement stairs to the door. "It doesn't look like anyone has been here lately, so that bodes well for us."

Not sure I'd agree with her assessment, but the place did look abandoned and forlorn. Even so, someone with Kaslow's skill set could easily infiltrate a target area like this,

collect the desired prize, and be on his way without any obvious signs he'd ever been there. Or, he could be waiting for us to enter the building and then Bam!

The thing that did bode well for us was how Morrow sounded yesterday and this afternoon, as if he had no idea where the map was actually located. That meant Kaslow didn't know either. We were safe until the moment one of us held it in our hand.

"Watch out for rabid vermin on the loose," I said, playfully, though my boy shot me a look imploring me to shut the hell up.

"Hopefully, we won't come across *any* vermin—animal or otherwise," she said, unlocking the door. "Follow me."

She took my son's hand in hers and they stepped inside, followed by one of her guards. The rest of the armed foursome pulled up the rear behind me.

Talk about a ramshackle hellhole. It looked like no one had been here in many, *many* years. Once inside, something scurried past my feet and Alistair's. A mirthful moment followed, when he nearly jumped into Sulyn's arms. Certainly, he'd see things differently. I stifled a snicker, but one of the guys behind me didn't. My protective paternal instincts almost kicked in, until I saw Sulyn wrap her arm inside of his to pull my boy closer to her. The poor kid would be just fine.

Several more critters scurried across the floor, but Alistair was paying more attention to the enormous webs we passed as we reached the stairs.

"It looks worse in here than I expected," Sulyn admitted. "Grandfather said it shouldn't be as bad upstairs."

At least the stairs themselves seemed fine, and were made from sturdy oak that had escaped the dry rot I noticed throughout the main floor. As we moved up each floor, the glow from the flashlights briefly illuminated dustier windows than the ones downstairs. The limousine's parking lights were a dull glow. Its motor idled smoothly, as if the kid was ready to take off at any moment. Thus far we were alone inside the place…I didn't sense any predatory energy. The greatest danger was having something collapse on us, or falling through an unseen hole.

When we reached the fifth floor, it seemed more complete than anywhere else. Not near as dusty and overrun with cobwebs either. As if someone occasionally had taken pains to maintain it while ignoring the rest of the building, the floors and walls were almost entirely free of holes and other obvious signs of decay and disuse.

Sulyn quickened her pace, and the guards closest to her kept up. She directed one of them to point a halogen beam toward a door at the end of a hallway to our left.

"When we are inside, it should take only a few minutes to get what we came for," she said, once the rest of us caught up with her again. "I have my grandfather's and great uncle's birth dates memorized, as well as the lock's pattern."

Then this should be a lickety-split maneuver. That would be good. We were all right for the moment, but my instincts urged me to make sure we didn't linger too long up inside the building.

Suddenly, Sulyn seemed nervous, fumbling with the door's key. I sensed it had nothing to do with the building's creepiness or the possible presence of a *gui*. She'd been here before, perhaps on many occasions as a young girl…. Did something tragic take place in this room, beyond the scope of the personal history she had revealed to us?

"Here, let me help you," said Alistair, when her hand continued to shake after failing to insert the key.

To my surprise, she allowed him to do it, and a moment later we stepped into the abandoned office of Cheung Yung-fa. The improved housekeeping on the fifth floor was even better in his office. Not immaculate, but only a thin layer of dust covered the desk and row of filing cabinets nearby. Sulyn immediately moved to the closet, where the door sat partially open.

"Hopefully, we are not too late…."

Her words, but definitely my thoughts.

She carefully opened the door fully, the flashlight's beam revealing nearly an inch of undisturbed dust covering the floor and an old bank safe from near the turn of the previous century.

"Hui Lin…bring the light closer to the safe," she told the guard standing nearest to her.

Once the numbers on the dial were clearly illuminated, Sulyn worked quickly to unlock the safe. It took three tries to get it right, but as she steadied her breathing and pace the door opened. We all moved closer for a better view.

Lots of documents tied with string were stacked inside, along with a few bundles of letters held together by rubber bands. Also, a few loose bills from currency long outdated, and a rubber stamp with a dried-out inkpad. But no map.

"I don't see it," she whispered, worriedly.

Her shoulders began to shake, but then she caught herself. It didn't mean the storm wasn't still rolling in…it was just all inside of her now.

"Why does it have to be obvious?"

Alistair gently moved in to where Sulyn had slumped down onto the floor next to the safe as he said this. While Sulyn seemed fixated on a previous image of what she sought, Alistair quickly moved through the tied bundles. In the middle of one was a soft leather square the size of a standard checkerboard.

"Oh, my God—you found it!"

Sulyn's surprise was matched by my sense of relief. Of course, I had to see the damned thing first in order to be sure. But from where I hovered behind them, I could see intricate details etched in the leather.

"Is this sheepskin?"

"No, Alistair, I believe it's goatskin instead," I said, after bending down to where Sulyn held the map.

If it wasn't the genuine article, then you could call me a monkey's uncle. I had no

doubts about its authenticity. My boy shot me an annoyed look, until Sulyn confirmed that goatskin was a material favored by her ancestors.

“Is there anything else you need from there?” I asked her, motioning to the documents and letters that might mean something to her or her grandfather. “If not, we should be going.”

Once I realized we’d found what we came for, I started to feel queasy. An odd sensation I’ve rarely experienced, at first I didn’t know what to think of it. But then I remembered the last time I experienced such a feeling and what later transpired. Years after the crusades had ended, I was called on to aid the peace efforts between the Order of the Dragon and the Ottoman rulers. It was a terrible failure. Worst of all was the fact I had made bitter enemies amongst the highest leaders of the Dragons. To this day I seriously doubt the blood drinkers among them have ever forgiven me.

And here I was just trying to help. Like my current cursed relationship with the CIA, as soon as things went to shit back then, I wanted out. Permanently. But, not the permanent manner they had in mind.

For years, the famed Drakul—the cruelest menace to mankind I had ever encountered until Hitler—hunted me. He tracked me across Europe and Asia, and only relented when I reached the New World. Whenever close, I could feel him. I later found out he could ‘see’ what I saw through my eyes. When that happened, the strange sensation that visited me in Cheung Yung-fa’s abandoned office was what I experienced.

Someone was looking through my eyes again. Could it be Drakul, having sensed my presence in this extreme corner of the Asian continent? It seemed unlikely he’d have an interest in treasures that won’t promote his eternal bloodsucking existence. But someone else I know could feel much differently about the map’s potential bounty.

Viktor Kaslow? That vile bastard, mother….

“We need to leave now!”

Beyond scaring the holy hell out of Sulyn, her startled guards pulled out semi-automatic handguns and pointed them at me. What fun it would be for them to see bullet wounds form and then heal—unless they all went for kill shots. They would either watch my body die like an apparent ‘normal’ human being, or see it vaporize into thin air. In either case, I’d wake up someplace else in a brand new body that looks just like the one I presently reside within. As for Alistair and Sulyn—and likely her grandfather’s guardian hit men, they’d all be as good as dead.

I know Viktor Kaslow quite well. Based on his exceedingly cruel nature, and what I believe he already knows about me, the next best thing to torturing and killing me slowly is to leave evidence for when I return in the next lifetime…. Evidence of a tortured and murdered son, wife, and Chinese chick who got too close to the Barrow boys.

I had to take my chances.

Ready to be blasted to smithereens in the next few moments, I picked up Sulyn and Alistair and moved them to the office door. I tried to give an explanation in the ancient Cantonese I’m familiar with to the guards, believing they still intended to shoot me at any

moment. I doubt seriously my words were helpful…maybe it was my wild gestures to get moving. Whatever it was, it proved effective.

"*Run!* We may only have a minute to get to the bottom and out to the cars!"

"*What?!* That's insane, William—"

"No it isn't, Dad!" I told Alistair, grabbing both his and Sulyn's arms as I took the lead. "Kaslow's on his way…if he isn't here already!"

Maybe it was the creepiness of our dim surroundings as I practically dragged them both down to the main floor. Or, it could've been the building's creaks from having occupants where normally there were none…at least among the living. Whatever the reason, Alistair kept his tongue in check until we were safely out of the building and inside the back of Sulyn's limousine. I didn't have to tell her to urge the driver to get us out of there immediately. She handled that part marvelously, and we were speeding down the street before the Lexus had begun to pull out from the parking area.

"What in the *hell* was that all about?" my son demanded, once safely on our way back to the main drive where our hotel was located.

"You need to trust me, Dad," I said, turning my attention to Sulyn. I forced a smile to try and ease the worry and misgivings clearly written upon her face.

"Find someplace tonight to secure the map. And, as for our planned meeting tomorrow? Don't say a word of it now. Have a taxi with directions to our rendezvous point meet us outside the place we had lunch today, at the prescribed time we arranged for tomorrow—*don't* define any of these things in our presence tonight. In fact, don't say anything. Please, Sulyn…I'll explain everything to you tomorrow. Simply nod if you understand me."

She cast a nervous glance toward Alistair before nodding. I probably had just destroyed the fragile beginnings of our friendship—and even the deeper one with my son. But screw it. This was life and death—regardless of whether anyone else could see it or not. People were about to die—*innocent* people. That's an assured fact when Viktor Kaslow is involved, as I've stated before. Hopefully, Sulyn and her family's employees wouldn't soon be among those no longer living.

Alistair tried to badger me with questions. But this time I was as silent as a catatonic mime, staring straight ahead until I saw the spot I wanted the driver to drop us off—four blocks from the hotel.

"Now will you tell me what in the hell's going on?" said Alistair, once we were standing on the sidewalk. "This is beyond frigging crazy, Pops!"

"Do you want to see her among the living again or not?"

"Well, yeah, of course I do—what kind of fucked-up question is that?"

"One that requires you to shut your damned mouth and just trust me!"

Alistair waved to Sulyn and then I grabbed him forcefully by the shoulder and pulled him into the shadows of a commercial bank.

"Don't say another word—just listen!" I said, hating myself for the stern tone I had to

use to make my point. “Kaslow is watching you right now—he sees where we’re at through my eyes. I’m going to try and get us back inside where we’re staying without giving him any more information than he already has!”

At any other time, Alistair’s current befuddled and exasperated facial expression would be worthy of YouTube video star status. Beyond priceless. Thankfully, he kept his lips zipped tight.

None of what happened next was easy, and I had no idea if Kaslow had already figured out where we were by then. Hell, it wasn’t impossible the sick bastard was perched in a nearby upstairs parking garage holding a high-powered rifle pointed at either one of our heads.

I zigzagged back and forth with my son at my side, and used an alley to reach our hotel. I closed my eyes when we approached the front and told Alistair to guide me inside the building and up to our room. Meanwhile, I filled my head with happy thoughts about birds, butterflies, and growing up in Judea—things that actually do make me less stressed, and even bring some joy into my mind.

We stepped off the elevator and a wave of relief washed over me as Alistair announced we had reached our destination. But then he gasped, muttering ‘Oh my God!’ over and over.

I opened my eyes, gasping as well.

The rubber stamp from Cheung Yung-fa’s safe rested inside the gold handle to our door. How the damned thing got there would be anyone’s guess. Regardless, it meant two things at face value: someone outside of Sulyn’s people and us knew we had visited Cheung Yung-fa’s office and found the safe’s contents. They also knew exactly where Alistair and I resided.

Our protected status had ended, leaving us fully exposed. No more places to hide.

Chapter 16

Talk about the ultimate quandary.

Should we immediately leave and take our chances somewhere else? Or, would it be best to quietly enter our room—me only—and move through quickly in an attempt to disarm or destroy anyone lurking inside? In all likelihood, there wasn’t anybody here—that’s the way the old timers like myself would play this type of ‘present at the doorstep’.

For a moment, I just stood there, while my son kept mouthing ‘What in the hell do we do now?’ Granted, there were panicked vocal inflections to go with this, but I scarcely noticed. I was too busy thinking about who was involved and what this could mean—in every scope of possibilities.

“Shhhh!”

“But, Pops—”

“No!… I need to think for a moment.”

Really, I didn’t need to think any longer about anything. I knew what had to be done. Leaving the floor could easily set us up for an ambush by whoever had left the surprise on our doorknob. The way the antique stamp was precariously balanced upon the handle told me it had been delicately and purposely placed. Logic said whoever did this wasn’t inside the room, and the likelihood of an explosive linked to the door was remote. No one I knew would leave a booby trap so blatantly obvious.

“Wait here,” I mouthed silently, pressing my forefinger against my kid’s lips to keep him from saying anything else.

I gently removed the stamp from its perch to keep from jiggling the door handle, and quickly swiped my access key. In the next instant, I threw open the door and moved into the darkened room, somersaulting across the floor when I didn’t immediately detect anyone. Noises will usually draw some type of movement—even slight—from an assassin. I came up quickly in a crouched position, ready to launch myself in any direction, whether to avoid gunfire or meet an attacker head on. Of course, if it was Viktor Kaslow, everything I just did would produce a good laugh from him and little else.

“That has to be the sorriest defensive roll I’ve ever seen, William!” A gleeful voice announced from the bathroom. “Maybe you should stay retired!”

Cedric Tomlinson, my former field boss. Normally, his jovial voice would lift my heart and disarm my natural wariness. But, after what Roderick revealed to me the other night, I felt apprehensive. Cedric could be here to eliminate me and/or my progeny.

“Come on in here, Alistair,” he said, stepping into our room while turning the bathroom light on behind him. Despite nearing his fifty-sixth birthday, Cedric’s full hairline and flawless ebony skin made him look late-thirties at worst. And, that’s only because he carried a little gray in his closely trimmed beard and hair. He flashed the dimpled movie-star smile he’s known for and opened his palms as he raised his arms above his head. Not carrying a weapon in either hand, he motioned more urgently for Alistair to come inside. “We’ve got some serious shit to discuss.”

My son took a tentative step into our room and looked at me for further direction. I nodded for him to shut the door behind him and join me where I stood.

“How did you find us?” I asked, while directing Alistair to stand behind me. If Cedric intended to kill us, he would have to take me out first. “Did you follow us tonight?”

I casually tossed the rubber stamp to him.

“Tonight? Where’d y’all go?”

He looked perplexed as he caught the stamp. He twirled it in his hands for a moment to study it. When he looked back up at me again, his brow was furrowed.

“Wherever you went, is it where you picked this up?”

“We found it waiting for us just now when we returned to our room,” I said, feeling more vulnerable than I had when we first discovered our breached secrecy moments earlier. “It was resting on the door handle, when less than twenty minutes ago it was inside an abandoned office in the warehouse district.”

If Cedric hadn’t placed it there, since he was waiting for us inside our room, it had to be done by someone else. Logic pointed to Kaslow. No one, other than someone with unusual skills, could’ve picked the item up after we left Cheung Yung Fa’s office and beaten us back to our hotel room in time to get it perched just right on the door handle. Not to mention, I didn’t sense a normal human presence. Whoever had placed the stamp was long gone by the time we returned to our room. If it wasn’t Kaslow, then another immortal was involved.

Let me add a caveat as to why I believe no normal human being could’ve accomplished this ‘prank’—not even with the fact we walked four blocks after the limousine dropped us off. If the perpetrator was human, and we hadn’t run into them in the lobby or elevator, I would’ve sensed their presence. Mortal human beings leave a distinct scent that hovers in the air for several minutes, and sometimes as long as fifteen to twenty minutes. However, people who have died to their original physical makeup and gained a new immortal one also carry an odor—one that’s completely different from our natural state.

These supernatural essences fade in under a minute. That’s my basis for labeling this as an immortal’s doing. I did pick up Cedric’s human scent, although it was faint until I opened the door and entered our hotel room. It’s what alerted me to the possibility of an assassin lying in wait, and it was distinctly separate from what happened outside of our room. And, no, it’s not that unusual to be facing two entirely different enemies at once, as any seasoned agent will confirm. Still, I’ll admit that sometimes my scientific theories are as flawed as my attempts to roll for cover in a cramped hotel room.

“Well, you should know I had nothing to do with this,” said Cedric.

He tossed the stamp back to me after casting a worried glance at the door. Obviously, he shared my conclusion that the stamp had been placed on the door handle after he snuck into our room, roughly half an hour ago by my guess.

“The only reason I flew out here is to try and talk some sense into you about helping us intercept Christian Morrow’s plans to purchase an unusual weapon that can discreetly kill thousands at a time,” he continued “We know you’ve been in contact with him, and we also know he has high regard for Alistair. But, time is of the essence here. He’ll be on his private jet headed for Singapore this Saturday afternoon, and will arrive in Syria by Sunday night. This can only mean Morrow is closing in on a deal for this weapon as we speak.”

“What’s it going to take for you guys to take my retirement seriously?”

“Does that mean you won’t help us?”

God, how I wanted to say ‘That’s *exactly* what I mean!’ But I couldn’t do it. Granted, I don’t work for the CIA anymore. Period. If not for the fact I genuinely disliked this Morrow cat almost as much as I loathed Kaslow, I would’ve said ‘no thanks’ and immediately ushered Cedric out of our room.

My gut told me this situation wasn’t as clear-cut as I wanted it to be. I knew with certainty Cedric was talking about the Mantle of Genghis Khan. I came to Hong Kong for my elusive coin and end my eight hundred year wait to retrieve it. However, more and more, I felt an additional burden upon my soul, as if keeping the armored vest out of Morrow’s hands was as critical to my salvation as collecting the full thirty coins I took as payment to betray Jesus Christ. It was as if I’d be betraying him all over again if I allowed a weapon of mass destruction—even an ancient one—to find its way into the hands of someone desperately crazy enough to use it. A multitude of innocent souls could perish, and the blame could at least partially be laid at my feet.

I wanted no part of that reality any more than I wanted to share commerce with the crooked American businessman and his immortal Russian cohort.

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” I said. “I have some questions. Answer them, and we’ll see.”

“Okay…I’m game,” said Cedric, wearing a smug grin.

He looked over at Alistair, who merely shrugged. Neither one knew where I was going with this, although my boy would surely catch on in a moment.

“How did you find us? Was it through Roderick?”

“Roderick? Hmmmm…. How interesting you’d start with him,” he said. The mere fact he acknowledged Roderick’s existence told me more than perhaps he realized.

“So, you know him?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve known him for years, though he’s a creepy fucker worse than you.”

Well, that set up another question I had on my mind…but I decided to wait and stick with my first agenda.

“Did he tell you that we were staying here?”

“No. I haven’t talked to Roderick since the day you stormed out of Michael’s office.”

“Then, how did you find us?”

“Peter Snelling?” He laughed. “For Christ’s sake, couldn’t you pick the other alias you have of Saul Baronas?”

Well, that sucks. They weren’t secret aliases anymore.

“It was the bank cards, huh?”

“It was the fact that once ‘Peter Snelling’ ended up in the hotel’s database, and it was in close proximity from where you were last seen—as William Barrow at the Royal Garden—we knew it was you.”

He chuckled…either at how simply effective the agency’s common sense procedures

still were, or how frigging foolhardy I am. I wanted to slap the damned smugness clean off his face. But, since he hadn't mentioned Alistair's alias, maybe I could still use that one again later, to protect him.

"Next question…who do you think I really am?"

I'd be lying if I said my pulse didn't quicken while I watched him study me curiously for a moment.

"Why, you're William Barrow, of course!" Here came that Hollywood smile again. "That's all I've ever known you as, right? In fact, that's all anyone working in D.C. has referred to you by, from what I gather, Willie Boy! They tell me that you've had the name for damned near one hundred years—which opens a whole new can of worms, if we want to go there. Or, we can just skip ahead to the naked truth and call a spade for what it is…."

I hated him right then. Not completely, since he and I have shared some enjoyable experiences—great ones, actually—over the years. The way he looked at me as he watched me squirm was truly excruciating.

"Ah, calm down, Willie," he teased, shaking his head in amusement. "There isn't anyone at the agency gonna walk up to you and say, 'Hey, Judas, how's that coin collectin' biz working out for you?'"

So, it really was true. Roderick hadn't been bullshitting me after all…as I sadly had hoped.

"Seriously, man, we don't give a rat's ass about what you do on your own time or who you really are." He glanced at Alistair, whose mortified expression on my behalf had yet to lessen. "And get this…you ain't the only guy working for us who's as old as you. In fact, several of your *other* buddies have been turning tricks for us for years."

Perfect analogy. I felt almost as dirty and unloved as a junkie whore working for an ungrateful pimp.

"Well, that's disappointing," I said, which was true. And, the morose look I gave to Cedric should've told him I didn't completely despise him. "So, you guys are obviously looking at this Morrow problem as me versus Viktor Kaslow, right? Contrary to our less than pleasant discussion about him in Michael's presence, I'm sure you now see the monster he has become."

"Yes, we do," he agreed, and his smile disappeared. Sam Daniels was a close friend, and I'm sure it took every ounce of restraint to not foolishly pursue Kaslow on his own. "But the greater good always outweighs any personal vendettas I might have, or even you might have, against someone like Viktor Kaslow."

"Well, okay…so here's my third question. What exactly do you guys expect us to do, now that Kaslow knows where we are and Mr. Morrow likely is aware by now that we're connected with you? Do you expect him to let us chum up again—especially after the tense exchange we had this afternoon?"

Cedric didn't answer right away, looking away as if gathering his thoughts.

"The mikes we set up the other day were still in operation this afternoon, inside the

boardroom," he said, his tone hushed and thoughtful. "I agree it'll be tough to try and work our 'Plan A' of getting Morrow's trust through his previous connection with you, Alistair. But…there might be another way you two can get us close enough to intercept him before he makes the purchase of the Mantle of Genghis Kahn."

"So, it's the famed armor vest you seek? Sounds like a dangerous operation you guys are best suited for," I said, "I won't endanger Alistair's life any longer, not to mention other innocent people because Kaslow is around. It's in our best interest not to get any more involved with this situation than we already have."

Cedric chuckled and sat down on the edge of Alistair's bed, shaking his head as if I had just sprung a hilarious joke on him.

"This isn't the time to play coy, brother," he said. "We know you've been in frequent contact with Cheung Sulyn, and that she brought you to the hospital where Cheung Yung-ching is living out his remaining days. We also know Cheung Yung-ching's father was the last person connected to the mantle—we have photographs taken in 1928 that show it and some prized coins on display in an open seaman's chest, including a handful of silver shekels from around the time you were born. The chest is said to be hidden somewhere in Hong Kong, and Morrow has told several acquaintances—including two of our undercover people—a map leads to this hiding place."

"He mentioned this map in our presence yesterday," offered Alistair, pausing to look at me for my reaction. I shrugged, betting he'd be smart and reveal only information the microphones would've also captured. "And, I heard him say something the day before, on the main floor, about it being painted on some sort of disk."

"One made of teakwood," said Cedric. "It wasn't unusual to carve or paint a map on teakwood back in the day. However, no one has ever seen this map, and we have two other witness accounts on record detailing a leather map. I'm betting the map is more along those lines, and I believe Morrow's aware of this possibility. But, it isn't why I mentioned the map. I brought it up because I damn well guarantee William here is looking for the same thing, since finding the mantle could mean finding one of his bloodiest prized coins."

Ouch!

I get this is a logical conclusion, but it made me feel a little sleazy—as if I was just like the other treasure hunters out there, plundering for their personal gain. Hey, all I want is to gather what once belonged to me and bring my deadly coins before The Almighty. Even if it isn't enough to earn a pardon for my soul, perhaps it will prevent further suffering to those who could otherwise come in contact with the coins.

"I know you pretty well by now, William," said Cedric, as he stood again, this time to stretch his back. The sure signal our conversation was nearing its end. "I believe you've already learned something about this map, and you'll be making your own move to collect your coin. Ain't I right about that?"

I said nothing, determined to remain neutral in every aspect…including my facial expression, breathing, etc.

"Okay…that's fine. But I want both of you to consider a few things tonight and get

back with me when you're ready to tell me more." He moved toward the door, casually glancing over his shoulder as he continued to address us. "We don't want your coin, William. All we want is the map—or, if you can get it, Mr. Khan's damned mantle itself. We don't know how it works, or even care to find out at this point. We just want to make sure it stays out of Morrow's hands, and for that matter Kaslow's hands. If you come in contact with either item, William, I want you to contact me immediately. You don't even have to go out of your way—just do the thing you normally do to get your coins, and I'll bet my ass you *will* find the mantle."

"Anything else?" I wondered if he had any inkling someone like Sulyn was in possession of the map.

"I need someone to keep you in line, William, so my final words are for Alistair." His deep brown eyes were aglow. On fire, definitely, though I couldn't tell if it was due to anger, excitement, or a mixture of both. "Christian Morrow has been connected to terrorism in the Middle East for years, and was already a sympathizer against the U.S. before he entered Georgetown. Maybe it had something to do with his father's murder in Cairo by our French allies…maybe not. In any case, his education was funded in large part by the Syrian faction he has channeled illegal arms to for the past dozen years."

He waited on a reaction from my boy. Alistair nodded subtly, perhaps picturing the handsome man with the cruel smile and frigid eyes as the bright and cheerful pupil he once knew.

"Many thousands of innocent victims—mostly unarmed villages deemed 'in the way' of this group's expansion efforts are the direct result of his influence in obtaining these weapons," added Cedric. "All of his past crimes will seem like a small drop in a bucket if he succeeds in delivering this so-called mantle to the team of Syrian scientists waiting for it. It once raised a nomadic ruler to become the greatest conqueror of his time. Harnessed to modern technology, who knows what it can do now?"

Cedric opened the door and prepared to step out, cautiously glancing to either side of the hallway. If I trusted him more, I could've told him he wouldn't face the same fate as Sam Daniels. I honestly didn't believe Viktor Kaslow would strike at the InterContinental as he had at the Royal Garden. For one thing, the voyeurism through my eyes ceased the moment I laid eyes on the rubber stamp waiting for us. As if Kaslow only wanted to feel my reaction, his presence left me…. Perhaps my nemesis savored the moment for all it was worth and decided to save additional torment until our next encounter.

Just to be safe, I hurried to take a whiff as Cedric surveyed the hallway. He may have royally pissed me off, and I still worried about Roderick's warning that my former field boss might seek to execute me before this latest misadventure ended. But, I still liked the guy…twenty years of good camaraderie counted for something.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Cedric looked amused as he caught me looking over his shoulder.

"Making sure you're okay…that's all."

"Don't worry about me."

He laughed and pulled back his summer evening jacket to reveal a small handgun.

Normally, I would've laughed at the size…but it was a Herstal, and likely loaded with armor-piercing bullets. I doubted anyone could kill an immortal born from the power of the Tree of Life's crystals. But, a Herstal would probably knock the sucker out long enough to escape. I'll bet Kaslow hadn't considered something like that…yet.

"You take care of Alistair and yourself, William," he said, closing his coat to conceal the weapon that surely hadn't been brought into China legally. "And, don't believe everything people tell you about the agency. We don't all hate you and we certainly don't want you erased from this lifetime. You know how to reach me…take care."

I watched Cedric move down the hallway, seemingly without a care, until he disappeared from view. Then I listened…. I listened for a good five minutes after the elevator claimed its lone passenger and headed down to the lobby. Despite no other signs of danger, I knew I'd keep a strong vigil and wouldn't sleep again for the second straight night.

Chapter 17

Friday afternoon, ten minutes past one o'clock.

Waiting for Sulyn's people to pick us up in front of Café Grey turned into a nerve-wracking experience, and a questionable scheme at best—cooked up the night before by my boy and his new gal pal. Cedric Tomlinson and Viktor Kaslow's effortless destruction of our false sense of secrecy and control became the impetus for coming up with a new plan.

Personally, I thought the taxi instructions I gave Sulyn last night, just before we parted ways, were sufficient. Kaslow would likely track our whereabouts anyway. If we wanted anything fancy to throw him off, we needed to plan for that opportunity exceptionally well. I seriously doubted there would be a single 'do over' if we screwed up.

As it turned out, nearly every silver and dark luxury sedan we saw coming up the street brought us to the curb, only to watch the cars pass by each time. Finally, a light blue Mercedes pulled twenty feet ahead of us and stopped when it was out of the line of traffic. The limousine driver from last night stepped out and waved to us.

"Sulyn sent me to pick you up—come hurry!"

He opened the back passenger door and motioned for us to move quickly. Alistair and I surely looked like typical tourists, dressed in khaki shirts and shorts, wearing sun hats and the darkest shades we could find in the InterContinental's gift shop. We scurried to where he stood and climbed into the backseat.

Despite our conspicuous attire, I was reasonably certain neither Morrow's immortal henchman or the CIA would move to apprehend or kill us. Not yet. It made more sense to find out exactly what we knew, or where we were going first. I had plans to get creative with that aspect once we traveled on water instead of land.

"I am Jeong Chan Lee, but you may call me Stephen if you like," said our young driver, once on the thoroughfare. "Sulyn is waiting for you at the boat."

His generous smile wasn't there last night. Maybe the *guis* in the warehouse district worried him. Old superstitions die hard…especially when continually fed by oddities like myself.

"We were under the impression that you, or someone else working for Ms. Cheung, would park the car and motion toward the courtyard in front of the building for us to come to you," said Alistair, sounding perturbed. "That was supposed to happen more than half an hour ago. Were you not aware of those instructions?"

The kid's smile disappeared, and regardless of whether or not it was his fault, the cheerful disposition changed to someone about to get his last meal on death row. Likely the instructions got messed up at another link along the chain of communication, and he unwittingly ended up holding the bag.

"Forget about it," I said, offering what I hoped was a good-natured smile for my boy and this kid who apparently liked the name 'Stephen' over his ancestral one. "Where's this boat?"

"It is docked at Tolo Harbour," he said, the light returning to his countenance. "It is not far."

"Sounds good. Thank you, Stephen."

"And, what if we are now being tailed by someone with ill intent?" Alistair shot me a worried look. His response came off less discreet than I'm sure he realized. Our driver looked uneasy again.

"Well, if it's any consolation, Ali, I didn't sense Kaslow's glowering gaze from anywhere nearby," I whispered, as he should have done. "So, it leaves a possible tail from someone in the agency, or possibly someone else working for Christian Morrow if the deal he has with our Russian buddy isn't an exclusive arrangement."

"Well, that's just frigging great!"

It could've turned out much better if you had left things well enough alone, my boy.

I didn't bother telling him this. Instead, I focused on the fact that killing either of us jeopardized locating the mantle. At least in terms of finding it before Morrow's meeting with the Syrians the next afternoon.

Some of you may be disappointed that Sulyn's boat wasn't a modern 'junk' docked in the harbor. Instead, a yacht awaited us. A sixty-footer by my estimation, it would be a fabulous ride for a New Year's party. I figured it would suffice for an afternoon treasure hunt, as well.

Dressed casually in white shorts and a conservative burgundy blouse, this latest

ensemble accentuated Sulyn's curves. It didn't go unnoticed by Alistair, whose sour mood immediately lifted when she waived to us and called to him by name. She stood on the deck next to a pair of males who were either crewmembers or the overbearing bodyguards she complained about yesterday.

"Hello Sulyn!" he called to her, motioning for me to keep up as he ran to the boat. Good thing we're planning on returning to the States in a few days, or Alistair's flame for Ms. Golden Eagle might become past tense.

"Are you ready for a little sight seeing on our way to find the cave?" she asked, once we joined her aboard the ship.

"Absolutely," I said. The churning butterflies were getting worse. "Would you mind if I take a look at the map before we get started?"

She and Alistair eyed me suspiciously, as if I didn't trust her to captain this expedition. That wasn't it at all. I wanted to get my bearings straight, and I planned to suggest a few extra side trips to muddle the map's true destination.

"Sure." Her lovely smile faded slightly. She carefully pulled out the leather document from her purse and handed it to me. "I looked it over last night. It leads to a famous landmark not far from here, along the northern shore of Tolo Channel."

"So, the cavern is located somewhere inside Wong Chuk Kok Tsui?"

I was surprised Alistair knew of this place, which I had viewed from the decks of two ships during my previous visits to Hong Kong, under its British occupation. A slight nervous snicker escaped my throat as I considered how the area had always captured my imagination, largely since the cape's famous 'Devil's Fist' in the shallow water always reminded me of the Homeric tales of ancient giants rising out of the sea.

But, I'd never felt my coin calling from the unique sedimentary rock formation. Nor had I felt it anywhere near this particular spot…until our flight veered near it four days ago. I felt it strong then, but thought it could be anywhere in the South China Sea—perhaps in the deeper waters north of the channel's cape.

As I took a moment to study the map, I recognized a few features and in particular the directional markings. Some details were taken from older maps and transposed onto this 'newer' version. It made sense in light of the strange dream I had a few nights prior, where it appeared the cavern held the steamer chest containing the coin and the mantle for some time. I originally thought the map was created no earlier than the advent of World War II. But recognizing the cartographer influencing the design told me the map could be five hundred years old.

"This has obviously been in your family longer than your grandfather's lifespan," I said, being careful to watch the condescending tone my son recently warned me about. "The map bears the characteristics of a Jorge Alveres creation. Yet, from what I gathered yesterday in your grandfather's presence, I would doubt it's original to when Jorge mapped the coast and islands surrounding Hong Kong in 1514."

"I have heard of this Mr. Alveres," she said, wearing a look of admiration for the first time in our acquaintance. "I've always thought the map looks older than my grandfather's

assessment. There is a rumor of several caves along the coast that have long belonged to my family. For centuries commodities were moved from the caves to the mainland and then back again. The cave we seek may be the oldest, and if it is the one my father spoke of when I was a little girl, it was first used by my ancestors in the fifteenth century."

"I don't think we should head directly for the destination outlined in the map," I said, quietly, drawing sharp looks from them both. "Alistair told me that he advised you during your phone conversation last night of the recent threats we have encountered this week. Just so you know, we are being tracked right now. It could be Morrow's people or it could be the American government. We need to throw them off the path by visiting a few similar sites from the surrounding area, both before and after we visit Wong Chuk Kok Tsui."

She looked dismayed, as if I'd royally screwed up her plans for the afternoon. But then she began to smile. Sulyn motioned to a member of the yacht's staff to come to her, and she whispered something that sounded a little like Mandarin to the older gentleman. He looked at me suspiciously for a moment before bowing to her and rounding up the rest of the crew. Immediately, they moved to their stations and prepared to get the ship moving.

"We will take a tour of the islands just north of the channel beyond Wong Chuk Kok Tsui and then make a stop there on our way back," she said.

Even though this wasn't how she wanted to spend the afternoon, she was giving her best effort to adopt the revised route with some enthusiasm. Luckily, Alistair approved of what I was going for and added two thumbs up for the charade I had in mind. But we weren't done with the planning.

"That's a start," I said, making sure I looked pleased by their initial acceptance of the idea. Now came the sales pitch that had to work, or the idea would sink fast, like the steel battleships in the Battle of Hong Kong long ago. "To make this a foolproof ruse, we'll need to get out of the boat a few times so the last spot we visit—Wong Chuk Kok Tsui—won't look any more special than the other places we visit beforehand."

"How can we do that if we're walking around with a map in our hands?"

That was the image in Alistair's head.

"Maybe we can have it out at all times, and never give an indication we found anything of importance in all the islands, or along the northern shores of the channel?"

That was our lovely hostess's point of view. Getting closer to what might work….

Here's mine.

"No…I've almost memorized the details already, so give me another moment and this baby will go back in your bag," I said, drawing skeptical looks from them both. "If it makes you feel any better to have it along, I suggest spending the most time with it in one of the first two to three places we visit, and don't bring it out at all in the last one. It should be an easy sell to admire the rock formations near the famed 'Devil's Fist'. According to what I've gathered from the map, the cave should be easy to recognize… unless I'm missing something."

"No, you are correct," Sulyn advised, moving over to show me a long inscription in tiny Chinese symbols along the bottom. "That is what the inscription tells us…the cave

should be ‘in line with the base of the middle of the back knuckles of the fist’, and the entrance should be in plain view.”

“That seems easy enough to follow,” said Alistair, obviously pleased this didn’t seem overly complicated. He stepped over to the ship’s railing to take a peek at the water a dozen feet below. “Now that we’ve got it taken care of, let’s have some fun!”

It must’ve been the cue she was looking for. Sulyn said something excitedly to one of her bodyguards, who had patiently waited for us to finish our quiet discussion just out of their ear’s reach. As the older crewmember had done, this one bowed and stepped inside the salon, while the other remained stoic as he studied me.

“Well, William…shall we join your father?”

She held out her arm and I took it, gently, escorting her to my boy who met my gaze with a slightly jealous one. He had nothing to fear, as I’d never do anything to knowingly hurt him.

Me bowing out seemed to suit my son and Sulyn just fine, and before long the personal guard who disappeared returned with a small wait staff that prepared a table for us on the deck. So, the afternoon began with a light lunch and fine Chardonnay, and before long we had visited three islands of the many that surround Hong Kong.

I had forgotten the beautiful lagoons and almost surreal beauty in this part of the world. However, I would’ve enjoyed it more if the threat of danger hadn’t been hovering over our heads. Three helicopters passed over us, which raised more than a tiny bit of suspicion our progress was being tracked. It seemed excessive, where a subtle approach would be more in line with the goal of catching us holding the prize.

It kept me looking out to the sea around us, for as far as my gaze would reach. But for now, Kaslow’s voyeur tricks had yet to resume.

Finally, after a few hours spent enjoying our playful ruse, we returned to the channel and approached the famed monuments that marked our destination. Alistair commented on how crazy it was that something so prominent and ‘touristy’ would mark the spot where two of the most legendary and destructive objects lay at rest.

I’m sure he had a lot to say about the subject, since he held Sulyn’s rapt attention. However, I listened to something else, as the pull of my blood coin began to send the familiar trembling sensations up and down my left arm. It was here. Whether it meant inside the cave or not would have to be determined, but the sucker was within the span of a football field from our boat and the incredible formations before us.

It would be a tough sell we were simply enjoying the final stop of our sightseeing tour and wanted a brief look around. This would especially be true if the sensation turned painful for me. It doesn’t always happen, but sometimes the bloodier coins with the most deaths upon them bring a stiffer penalty for my efforts to reclaim them from the world.

A handful of chartered boats were anchored near the shoreline. Roughly two-dozen tourists mulled around the spot where we hoped to find our mysterious cave. Would there be room for all of us inside? Such a humorous musing could turn into a deadly prophecy if my Soviet enemy caught wind of what was here—regardless of the significant number of

innocent people loitering near the cave entrance.

“What should we do?” asked Sulyn, staring out at the group that apparently found something their tour guide said to be quite funny. Nearly another dozen people were climbing along the rocks.

“We should go ahead with our plan,” I said. “If the passageway to the cave is where it should be, and we see clear evidence of it, we’ll come back later tonight. We will know what to look for under flashlights, instead of having to search for clues in the dark.”

“And if it isn’t here?”

I couldn’t believe Alistair bothered asking such a question, since it could only mean the map was inaccurate. We had nothing else to go by, other than my innate ‘coin sense’.

“Let’s go,” I said, ignoring his question.

We were close enough that I didn’t wait to be pampered with a dinghy moving slowly to the shore. I dove into the shallow water and swam to the shoreline, pleased the water’s temperature was warmer than expected. I soon heard Sulyn and Alistair splashing through the water to catch up with me. I stepped out of the water and casually cut a path through the tour groups. The coin’s pull had grown heavier…it was tantalizingly close.

Barely able to concentrate, I looked back at the massive fist rising out of the shallow water, the surf crashing softly against it. The middle finger easy to determine, I looked around to where the ‘back knuckle’ faced. I saw…nothing. Nothing immediately obvious.

I moved up closer to the sedimentary rock wall. If a doorway was concealed, there should be at least minute cracks to define it. Unless the doorway was camouflaged in some other fashion…perhaps supernaturally? The damned giant finger might as well literally flip me off.

“Do you sense where the doorway is on this thing…William?”

Alistair almost called me ‘Pops’ in front of Sulyn. Glad he didn’t, since I was having an increasingly difficult time trying to pinpoint the origin point of my coin’s call to me. It came from somewhere below the earth’s surface, although not directly beneath our feet. It was maddening.

“No, I don’t,” I confessed, releasing a low sigh.

Without clearer clues to work with, we were screwed. I allowed my gaze to scan the rock wall again. Still nothing, even when I lined it up with the frigging middle finger again.

“Maybe we should look around a little more…check more of the area,” Sulyn suggested. Hers was the most beautifully forced smile I’ve ever seen. At least she was sticking to my ruse instructions. “There is a path over here….we can walk behind—*huh?”*

We all heard it at the same time. One of Sulyn’s bodyguards that remained on the yacht was holding the receiver from the ship’s telephone. He called urgently for her to return to the ship. It had something to do with a shooting at her grandfather’s estate. Something else was said, too, but I couldn’t make it out.

Cheung Sulyn could well be the most in-control, vivacious young woman I’ve known

in some time. Whatever my sparse translation had missed of the hurried shouts in Chinese from her personal protector, she understood fully. Her refined façade disintegrated, and she ran screaming to the yacht, with Alistair and me close behind her.

In that instant, I fully understood what Viktor Kaslow's 'voyeur' absence from our afternoon excursion meant. He had been busy taking care of other business…*very* busy, as it turned out.

Chapter 18

I believe nearly all of us have certain situations where no matter how hard we try, we invariably say the wrong thing. My shortcomings come up most often in the area of comforting those who grieve. My heart aches terribly for others—particularly when the innocent suffer. In the past, my heart has grown heavy enough that I've dropped to my knees and wept for days in agony. Yet, even though I feel this way, more often than not when I open my mouth something cold and callous comes out, instead of the overwhelming compassion I most often feel.

It's what happened that late Friday afternoon in Hong Kong, where the summer's unforgiving sun was almost unnoticeable in light of Sulyn's profound grief as she wept on the deck floor. Alistair held her tenderly in his arms, comforting Sulyn as best he could for her terrible loss. It wasn't the words themselves but the way he said them that drew her closer to him, as they sat together. I looked on helplessly from nearby.

I had told her how terribly sorry I was for the loss of three family members, but the words sounded shallow…and not just to me. I felt numb, but it was based more on anger than grief. For the moment, all I wanted to do was find a way to destroy Viktor Kaslow for yet another terrible crime in his illustrious career of wickedness that seemed destined to never end. There would be time to deal with such anger, and it needed to come later.

I hated myself for my glib response—and trust me, I know it came across terribly. Even her guards gave me an odd look, and surely they weren't strangers to expressing themselves without an ounce of emotion.

But at least Alistair was there for her, making his initial move to catch her as she fainted, right after we stepped back onto the yacht. Her closest protector had just informed Sulyn that her two young nieces and nephew had been gunned down in Cheung Yung-ching's palatial mansion in the hills overlooking the city. Those killings were in addition to the four guards, kitchen help, maid and butler that were on the property at the time. Thirteen deaths in all, and afterward the one hundred and fifty-year-old building was

torched.

Details were hard to come by, and it took almost the entire trip back to Tolo Harbour to determine exactly what had taken place. The attack happened shortly after Sulyn and part of her grandfather's staff—including the kid, Stephen, who picked us up that afternoon—had left the estate. Police were already on the scene looking for clues, and Sulyn had been advised that officers were waiting for our return to the pier. Apparently, they were making a rare move to place her in protective custody after another attack soon followed the first one, roughly an hour before our arrival at Wong Chuk Kok Tsui.

The fifth floor at the Adventist Hospital was the recipient of this second assault, and only a kill shot barely missing its mark kept Cheung Yung-ching among the living. His bodyguards and the nurses on duty at the time didn't survive the violence. Only a young orderly, who hid beneath the nurse station, lived to tell what happened. He described the lone gunman as 'a tall blonde man with unusual blue eyes'.

I would've remained ignorant of these details, if not for Sulyn's tearful relating to Alistair what happened at the estate and hospital. Ignorant, that is, until Cedric could also bring me up to date on the latest news. He stood on the pier with two local homicide detectives when the ship returned.

"The detectives have requested that you and I go downtown with Cedric and wait for them to join us," I told Alistair. He had continued to comfort Sulyn as the police contingent boarded the yacht. He looked up at me with reddened eyes from grief. "Sulyn is going with them to see her grandfather, who has requested to see her."

"Please come with me—*please!"* Sulyn implored him.

It broke my heart to see her overwhelming distress. Who wouldn't be on the verge of a complete breakdown upon learning most of their family had been suddenly taken away by senseless violence? It sounded like Cheung Yung-ching was on the verge of joining them in the after life. Very soon it could be Sulyn and her brother, presently in the Hawaiian Islands, left to carry on the Cheung family legacy.

"I don't think they'll let me," said my boy, looking longingly at me to come up with something after he shot a disdainful glance at Cedric and the detectives. "If not, I promise to come to the hospital as soon as they finish with us."

Alistair must've been expecting a quick interview and for us to be released. However, the pained expression on Cedric's face foretold a worse experience was in store. Not that he intended to harm us—I didn't get that from him at all. But, something was up. I doubted we still had free rein to find the mantle, as indicated last night. The mass murders had changed the rules and stakes of the 'find the coin and mantle mission'.

You might not believe me when I claim to have been more concerned about what happened to Sulyn's family…but I was. Remember what I mentioned a while back, about preventing Christian Morrow from obtaining the Mantle of Genghis Khan was just as important as recovering my tainted silver shekel? In the depths of my soul I realized Sulyn's personal well-being was tied to it all. Viktor Kaslow's murderous rampage was obviously in response to his American boss's determination to collect his prize at all costs, and to get the job done quickly. That prize's location remained largely under her control,

since she carried the map. No doubt, Kaslow was looking for it when he descended on the estate. The only aspect confusing to me is why he burned the place afterward…what was he trying to hide? Did he find something else he wanted to make sure someone like me never knew about?

"What would it hurt for Alistair to accompany Sulyn to the hospital?" I asked Cedric. It might be foolish to let him out of my sight, but something told me he'd be okay for now. Kaslow had moved on to somewhere else. "It might make it easier on everyone getting to the bottom of what happened. Besides, Alistair has established good rapport with Cheung Yung-ching."

"No, it's too dangerous, and I've been instructed to get you both out of harm's way," said Cedric, eyeing the detectives as if this had been previously discussed. "I'm taking you someplace safe for now, and you both will return to the States with Michael and me tonight."

Normally, I would've balked, since I presently held an entirely different take on the situation and what we should do about it. But, maybe Cedric was right…maybe I should be focused on getting my kid to safety and not put anyone else's life in danger. Hell, I could always come back to Hong Kong by myself and finish the job later. After all, I now knew where the coin was located. If I had to use an industrial drill to bore through Wong Chuk Kok Tsui's rock wall to reach it, then so be it.

Cedric allowed Alistair to escort Sulyn, and her two personal guards to the detective's sedan. Then he climbed into the modest Mazda he'd rented, motioning for Alistair to take the front seat and for me to get in the back.

"This ride's perfect for laying low," he said, after noticing my smirk in the rearview mirror. "So, do you still have the map with you?"

We had just pulled onto the main thoroughfare heading toward Hong Kong's immense skyline.

"I never had it to begin with…neither does Alistair."

He glanced worriedly at me. I'm sure he would've liked to have that look back. "Well, then, where is it? Does Ms. Cheung have it with her?"

"Not necessarily," I said, pausing to cast a casual glance out my window. I didn't care for the agenda behind the questions, and I started to worry. Maybe my assumption of being safe in Cedric's presence was premature. I steadied my breathing to keep him unaware of my increased wariness. "Since we couldn't make heads or tails of the map's details today, I think she might've left it on the ship."

"Or, when she got frustrated with the damned thing's ineffectiveness, she might've tossed it overboard at one of the islands we visited," added Alistair. "I saw her throw something overboard."

Nicely done, son. Alistair picked up on the same bullshit …. For the moment, I couldn't have been more proud. In truth, Sulyn did throw something overboard at the first island. I believe it was the remainder of her wine, since she was feeling a little light headed.

Now for the fun part…I couldn't remember if the map was left on the boat, or if she had her bag with her when she joined the detectives in their sedan. It was definitely in the bag, though. Meanwhile, the Mazda was slowing down, which indicated our driver was getting ready to turn around. Alistair's and my value on the plane of the living had just gone into a volatile swing. Roderick's warning about my life's worth to the CIA's leadership resounded loudly in my head. Was Cedric planning on taking us someplace to be disposed of, if he had confirmed that either Alistair or I had the map in our possession?

I glanced at my boy. A single stream of sweat coursed along his temple. It wasn't from the heat, since the car's A.C. had quickly cooled the interior. He was nervous, and perhaps sensed the same predicament I'd picked up on. From what I could see of Cedric, his face bore none of the characteristics of my kid's present state. He was still in control…but I saw anger in his eyes.

Suddenly, he pulled a u-turn and raced back toward the pier.

"I thought we were headed 'someplace safe' downtown?" I said, coolly.

Yes, I wanted my tone to intimidate. I was onto him. Maybe I didn't fully understand the scheme, but I sure as hell smelled the danger to me and especially my boy. Like a momma grizzly bear, I was prepared to take out the threat, and hoped Cedric fully considered what my immortality meant. I already knew he was armed—maybe not with the same gun I saw the other night, but with some weapon. If he were to fail to hit me, or at least miss a vital organ, he would soon be face to face with me, wearing an empty death stare while his body still sat forward in the driver seat.

Cedric didn't reply. The cat and mouse contest in full gear, I knew beyond any doubt that Alistair and I were in grave danger. But, not knowing for certain if my boy understood just how quickly things could turn violent with someone we've known heretofore as a friend, I had to plot things calmly…and quickly.

"What if I were to tell you exactly where I hid the map?"

This was risky. If he didn't take the bait and decided I was lying, the upper hand would be Cedric's. He studied me carefully for a moment, but let up slightly on the gas. This was good, although I couldn't help but grin—mainly at my kid's white-knuckle grip on his door handle. Racing at nearly seventy on a city street can do that to you.

"You're bluffing."

"No, sadly I'm not," I said, keeping my eyes fixed on his through the rearview mirror. Alistair shot me a worried look, which was exactly the card I needed to complete my hand. "But, if it's worth it to you to know, then you need to pull over and let my son out of the car. Otherwise, you can explain to Michael, Paul, or any other asshole you're in bed with as to how you fucked this up. No cooperation on your part, and you had better pray Viktor and Christian don't have a party someday dancing around your Virginian family's graves. You got that?"

The pause in his response was agonizingly long…much longer than I hoped or expected. But, just when I thought he wouldn't swipe at my baited hook, he suddenly swerved into a shaded alley and pulled over, not far from a pair of garbage receptacles. One was overflowing with trash from a nearby restaurant, but the other was closed. Could

be enough room for one or two corpses.

I had hoped Cedric would either tell my boy to immediately get out of the car and hoof it, or that Alistair would take the initiative and just flee. But, the poor kid didn't even have his seatbelt off yet.

Since I had no idea how this would go, I decided to take matters in my own hand. The skills that have earned me nefarious employment through the centuries provided the slightest advantage over an armed and seasoned intelligence agent—even one with decades of experience and awards for being among the best at his craft.

I had already removed my seatbelt with nary a click when Cedric made his move into the alley. In the split second that followed Alistair's hesitation and Cedric's calculated reach for his pistol, I had already locked his neck in my grasp. It would be an easy turn of his vertebrae to snap it and end his life in an instant.

But, instead, I leveled fierce pressure against his windpipe to render him unconscious. By then he had removed the Beretta with a silencer on the end from beneath his thigh. It had been armed and ready to do his bidding from the moment he sat down in the driver seat of his Mazda rental, while using his jovial tone to encourage my kid and me to join him in the car. I almost used the gun on him right then as I considered this.

It was something I reflected on repeatedly after we dumped his sleeping ass next to the cleaner of the two dumpsters and drove off in his car. Alistair had almost pissed himself, so the first stop was a Shell station with a restroom. While he was inside, I placed a quick call to Roderick. From there, it was a race against time to reach Sulyn at the hospital.

Chapter 19

It was nearing six o'clock by the time we parked Cedric's rental in a garage several blocks away from the Adventist Hospital. I hoped for an hour's head start—two at most. We'd never see his car again, but I decided to keep the Beretta, tucked inside my khakis with my shirt pulled over it. Hopefully I wouldn't need it, but the way the day was going made me think otherwise.

"Are you cool with everything we discussed?" I led the way, walking swiftly with Alistair right behind me as we navigated through slower pedestrians seemingly unaware the weekend had started. "And, you'll remember what to watch for with the cops?"

"Got it, Pops."

I could tell he dreaded this trip to see Cheung Yung-ching. Yesterday's visit was

completely expected, and Alistair knew it would be a pleasant experience long before our arrival. This, however, was an unannounced drop-in that not only could be ill received, but might get us arrested, killed, or both.

So many variables…so many things to go wrong. We had no idea if Sulyn was even there. We assumed the police followed through with what was told to us at the pier. However, Cedric's sudden hostility made me reconsider everything, beginning with the fact the two 'detectives' might not be upstanding members of Hong Kong's P.D. The only things weighing in their favor were the standard police computer and other equipment in the sedan that Alistair noticed when he walked Sulyn to their car, as well as the back-up patrol cars and four officers accompanying them. They looked legit, but who could say for certain?

As for Roderick, he was already in the area and would find his way onto the seventh floor, where Mr. Cheung had been moved. Apparently a dozen officers from Hong Kong's finest were stationed throughout the floor. Roderick advised they carried assault rifles in case Kaslow returned. And, yes, Roderick confirmed it was the Russian. Or, rather, it was Kaslow moving through the floor like Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*. It was a miracle that anyone—especially an old man dying from cancer—survived.

"I doubt they're going to simply let us walk onto the seventh floor without any questions, presentation of identity proof, or some official documentation that supports our presence in Cheung Yung-ching's company," worried Alistair, right after we stepped into the elevator.

"That's why you had better immediately tell them who you are and that you're there to see Sulyn," I advised, watching the lights along the top announce each floor we passed. "If she's unavailable, then you see if Cheung Yung-ching would be willing to visit for just a moment with Dr. Alistair Barrow."

The elevator chime announced our arrival onto the seventh floor. Before we exited the elevator, I assured him that I had the utmost faith he'd pull this off with aplomb. Truly I did have that confidence, although we could soon face a firing squad of sorts if someone connected with our CIA counterparts caught wind of what I had done to Cedric, forty minutes earlier.

Couldn't we just head back to 'Devil's Fist' and the famed rock formation ourselves, and not put ourselves at risk like this? Sure…but what would be different the second time from the first? There was something missing…a key ingredient obviously not included in the map itself. The missing element was where Mr. Cheung came in. I felt certain he could either tell us exactly what we were missing, or point us in a solid direction to find it on our own.

As we stepped off the elevator, to our left was a clear hallway, with nurses and orderlies taking care of what looked like normal tasks. To our right, however, a long table blocked all access to that side of the wing. Two police officers sat behind the table, and two others stood on either side. The standing cops carried assault rifles.

Alistair approached the policemen, and all four studied him suspiciously. I drifted a few feet behind him, and his tone carried cheerful confidence as he announced his name and request to see Ms. Cheung Sulyn. But I had grave misgivings when the two sitting

officers stood and motioned for their cohorts to approach us, which they did with their weapons pointed at our chests. My heart began to race…then I heard Sulyn's voice coming from a room roughly fifty feet away. Was it the room where her grandfather presently resided? Another four officers guarded the entrance—one on each side of the open doorway, and two standing across the hallway from them.

"Alistair?! Oh, thank God you've come!!"

Sulyn ran down the hall toward the table, where the officers bearing rifles lowered their weapons. I half expected an obligatory frisk—at least upon Alistair as he moved to meet Sulyn, who wrapped her arms around him as if he were her long lost lover instead of the new friend she had known for only a few days. He glanced at me, seemingly just as surprised, but kept the presence of mind to ask for an audience with her grandfather.

"Let me ask him…he might be able to handle a short visit," she said, and then addressed the police detail looking on. "They are friends of mine and of Cheung Yung-ching."

The officers nodded, and the two rifle-bearers returned to their guard posts. Sulyn gently pulled away from Alistair, smiling shyly before returning to her grandfather's latest room. Her lovely brown eyes were swollen and red from her grief, but they still carried the fire that was her determination to persevere.

After a soft conversation with someone whose hoarse whispers were barely audible, she leaned her head into the hallway and motioned for us to join her. I wanted to ask what became of the detectives that brought her to the hospital, but a tall orderly distracted me. I'd noticed him when we first arrived. Before he disappeared inside a room a few doors further down from where Cheung Yung-ching presently resided, the orderly sent a message using an ancient form of Celtic sign language. He did this quickly, beneath the cover of a clipboard he carried.

Sulyn eyed me curiously as we met her at the doorway, and I realized the wan smile on my face might've pointed to insensitivity, instead of the quiet admiration that inspired it.

Roderick's disguise was quite clever. I intended to compliment him for his masterful effort to transform himself from a ghostly druid into an Asian with most of the characteristics indigenous to the southern region of China. He'd perfected such skills in centuries past, and prefers ancient cloaking skills to modern technology. His message was for me to meet him on the main floor, and to look for the storage closet near the ER's waiting area.

"I thank you for speaking to your grandfather on our behalf," I told Sulyn, as she motioned for us to go to his side. Similar to the last time Alistair and I visited with him, four bodyguards kept watch, one in each corner of the room. I didn't recognize any of the four young men from the last time Mr. Cheung held an audience with us. "What became of your detective escorts?"

"They left soon after our arrival here, about an hour ago," she said. "They should be back sometime in the next half hour, I believe." She sounded hopeful, so they must have been good to her and her grandfather.

Great. It left us about twenty minutes to learn what we came for and get the hell out of

there. The detectives may or may not be good guys, but a call from the U.S. government to the Hong Kong authorities could spell trouble. Especially, if anyone in D.C. labeled me as a violent threat to law and order. That would make things extremely dicey. Our best hope was for Cedric to remain unconscious and unaccounted for.

Maybe I should've made sure he stayed out of service for several hours. It now seemed glaringly foolish to leave him out in the open as we did. I couldn't bring myself to harm him any worse than I had.

"We thank you, Mr. Cheung, for agreeing to meet with us," said Alistair, after we approached his bedside. He seemed extremely frail—much more fragile than yesterday. His hair bore a lot more white than when we last spoke with him. "William and I are so very sorry for your loss."

Cheung nodded slightly and motioned for Sulyn to help him sit up more. "The blonde devil with the glowing eyes came here…. He told me things…terrible things he would do to Sulyn when he found her," he said.

His voice was hoarse, and I noticed the bruised finger impressions around his larynx. In addition to the bullet wound just above his heart, which wept into the heavy gauze wrapped around his chest, it appeared Kaslow had tortured this helpless dying man in his attempts to learn more about Sulyn's whereabouts. Swelling on both cheeks indicated backhand slaps, which seemed to be every Russian pussy's favorite starting point for inflicting a steady escalation of physical discomfort.

"Did he tell you why he wanted to burn down your home?" I wanted to get to the root cause of what Kaslow was after as swiftly as possible. I did say the words with as much compassion as I could muster.

Cheung Yung-ching eyed me curiously, likely wondering how I'd know this would be an important thing for my nemesis to mention. I'm sure most folks would assume the ruthless murder of three children under the age of seven would be what a demon would want to gloat about. But this was not about bragging rights, and it's important to keep in mind that Kaslow has killed thousands of people in his sordid history on earth. I would venture to say he hardly thinks about the death toll or the make-up of his victims anymore. The burning of an esteemed estate with a meaningful history of its own would be something he might mention. But only if the destruction wasn't the fulfillment Kaslow sought.

"He mentioned your name…William Barrow. He said he found my secret and that you would need it to find yours," he said, drawing perplexed expressions from not just me. Sulyn and Alistair's brows were as furrowed as my own. "He demanded to know where Sulyn was, and I said I would never tell him."

Mr. Cheung may well have some terrible skeletons hiding in his closet, but in no way was this man a coward. Defying Kaslow in his mortal state was an unenviable endeavor, and to do so after this soulless human had become un-killable took more courage than I believe most human beings possess. Maybe that sort of thing comes when death's door is already in view. I nodded respectfully and hoped my slight smile was taken as sincere admiration.

“Grandfather…what secret was he talking about?” said Sulyn. Her voice was almost as hushed as his, as if she loathed asking the question. “Is it something on the list?”

List? What list?!

“He never told me, but he knows you have the map,” he said to her. “It must have something to do with the map…. Perhaps he was talking about the golden stylus.”

“Do you mean the one you allowed Lao Wee Kiat James to catalogue for the convention?”

“Yes…that one. I later changed my mind about it. Do you remember?”

“Yes, I remember.”

The color drained from Sulyn’s face, and the way her eyes darted back and forth told me how her mind was splicing together several recent and important scenes in her head.

“Oh, my God!” she whispered, sadly. “James was the only one to know of its existence. I tried to call him earlier today. There was no answer….”

In all likelihood, Kaslow had gotten to him first and then moved on to the Cheung family. It made sense, when also considering my voyeur experience from last night. Once Kaslow figured out who had the map, it was fairly safe to assume he passed the information on to his boss. Morrow certainly had scrutinized the same list of items Alistair and I had seen a few months ago when the convention was first announced. Could the unscrupulous dealer have coerced the earlier list from Lao Wee Kiat James?

“I never trusted him,” said her grandfather, his expression far more pained than his tone. “His carelessness has betrayed us all.”

We now had an entirely new plethora of questions to explore, but our visiting time was running out. Cheung Yung-ching struggled to keep his eyes open, and it would be ill-advised to continue our interview. Besides, my phone had buzzed an instant ago. Not wanting to be rude, I casually peeked at the screen and wasn’t surprised there was a text message from Roderick. I was, however, surprised by what it said.

“William…. LEAVE NOW! Detectives returned…. The Company sent three armed Spooks…. They are casing the main floor and will be up in a moment. Meet me on the fourth floor.”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Cheung, but Alistair and I must leave now.”

“What?!”

“No time to explain, Dad, but the enemy is on its way!”

Thankfully, that’s all it took to get Alistair moving. He was ready to bolt out of the room.

“Sulyn, do you still have the map with you?”

She looked confused, both by what we’d just learned from her grandfather, and certainly my sudden switch to survival mode. But she managed to give me a positive nod.

“Good. Tell no one about it, and wait for our call.”

I didn’t wait for her response, and carefully peered out into the hallway. The attendant cops’ demeanor was the same as it had been earlier. That was good…they likely weren’t aware of what was going on. But that could change at any moment.

I motioned for Alistair to follow me to the stairs, away from the police table-blockade. Just before we reached it, I heard the chime from the elevators behind us. Trouble had arrived.

* * *

We wasted little time racing to the fourth floor. Good thing, since excited voices exited the seventh floor as we stepped onto the fourth. My biggest worry was being identified while searching for Roderick. Fortunately, his preternatural intuitions told him where we were, and he pulled us into an unoccupied room near the stairs.

Still dressed as an orderly, the Asian attributes were remarkable up close. Even his cheekbones had pushed upward. But as I studied him after he closed the door and pressed his ear against it to listen, I saw the immortal I’ve come to know so well these past two millennia.

The best way I can describe this is that it’s sort of like a blurred double image, and if one focuses long enough on it they’ll see the hidden picture behind the illusion. I found Alistair’s reaction quite amusing. He stared at Roderick as if he couldn’t help himself, wearing an expression of disbelief and childlike fascination.

After a few tense moments of listening to footfalls racing past the door, Roderick quietly locked it and turned to face us.

“We won’t have long to talk. I have a plan to get you both out of here,” he said. His voice carried richness in person that often reminds me of listening to an audio book. At least that’s the way it projects in a small room such as the one we were in. I caught Alistair looking around him as Roderick spoke. No doubt this was a creepy experience for my boy, and I recalled how weird Roderick’s voice seemed when the former Highlander and I first conversed in the wilderness near Salisbury Plain in the second century. “You both will need to remove your clothes and put on the Johnny shirts I laid out for you.”

“Did you know Cedric tried to kill us today?” I asked him.

Alistair had already begun to undress, and Roderick motioned for me to hurry up and join him.

“Hmmm…did you happen to check the bullets after you tapped him out?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said, while tying the shirt behind me. “The gun was loaded, which was good enough for me.”

“You rightfully believe that Cedric was sent to interrupt your search for the Mantle of Genghis Khan and your latest beloved coin. But, why did you assume he wanted you dead?”

Wasn’t it frigging obvious?

“Maybe because he had the Beretta waiting under his thigh, with the safety off and ready to shoot us,” I replied, testily. “Do I have to wait for a frigging declaration to know my kid and I are in danger?”

He chuckled in response and eyed Alistair with some amusement. He held out his hand to him.

“Roderick Cooley,” he said.

“Alistair Barrow,” said my boy, still wearing a fascinated look as he studied Roderick’s face as the details subtly shifted. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“Okay, now that we’ve got the *‘This is your life’* segment taken care of, how about an answer to my question?”

“Why don’t you test the gun yourself?”

I hated his smugness, almost as much as Cedric’s from the other night. And this guy made it so much worse, since I had no doubt he was plucking my random thoughts out of the air like ripe cherries from a mature tree. I don’t believe in psychics, per se, but Roderick’s intuitions have always been annoyingly sharp.

“Maybe I should shoot you, huh?”

“Be my guest.” He grinned. “That is, if you don’t mind putting me to sleep.”

What?!

I picked up the handgun from inside my clothes piled on the room’s single bed, and opened the clip chamber.

Shit!

“That’s right…the weapon is armed only with tranquillizer darts,” said Roderick. “Now that you’ve learned that fun fact, I’m sure I’ll have your complete attention for what I’m about to tell you next.”

He didn’t have to be a smart-ass about it. Well, maybe he did a little, since my bullheaded assumptions had almost led me to murder Agent Cedric Tomlinson—my former boss and friend for nearly a quarter of a century.

Roderick went on to explain that Cedric had been told to get me and Alistair out of the country tonight, as things had gotten far too dangerous to continue now that Viktor Kaslow was on a mass murder spree. The agency now considered sending another Navy Seal team or a drone to assassinate Christian Morrow and anyone else around him with Syrian connections. I’m sure that order will include an attempt to blow up Kaslow if the Seals can isolate him long enough for the hit.

“But, now you have screwed up The Company’s plans, and the Spooks here now have been instructed to take you out,” Roderick advised.

“I take it these guys aren’t using tranquillizers or rubber bullets,” Alistair deadpanned. “So, do we wait here, or what?”

My sentiments, exactly.

“If we wait here, you’ll both soon be dead…. Well, at least you will be, Alistair,” he said, the mirth immediately siphoned from his tone. “I will assist you as much as I can in retrieving the mantle and your coin before our adversaries find them both. But, you must play dead for much of the next hour. There is a gurney for each of you, and I will cover you up with the lightest sheets they have on hand here. Be sure to breathe through your mouth, Ali.”

He retrieved a pair of gurneys from the other side of the bed and motioned for my son to get on one while I climbed onto the other. Meanwhile, more and more footsteps were moving outside in the hallway. Roderick gathered our clothes into a brown duffle bag bearing the hospital’s trademark insignia. Then he carefully covered us up.

“Remember to lie as still as possible…either play dead or *be* dead.”

He gently unlocked the door and opened it. Almost immediately, my truest friend was greeted by hostile male voices speaking in hurried Cantonese. Unlike me, Roderick is a true citizen of the world. He effectively met their negativity with words that sounded loving, even though I understood very little of what he said. The commotion quieted, and he was allowed to pull us out into the hallway.

Shame on me for not updating my knowledge of the common man’s Chinese! I vowed right then that if Alistair and I made it out of this ordeal alive and in one piece, I’d adapt Roderick’s unbiased outlook on life, liberty, and what it means to serve a government while maintaining one’s neutral status.

I hoped somewhere the Lord was smiling.

Chapter 20

One hour turned out to be almost three. Three hours spent inside what I assumed was a storage room, quite cramped and where Alistair and I quietly conversed after Roderick deposited our gurneys there. At least our hideout from the hospital’s hustle and bustle was safely removed from the ongoing manhunt for our whereabouts.

Since it remained possible that someone could enter the room at any time, we obeyed Roderick’s advisement to stay under the sheets. Finally, he returned, slipping inside the room while keeping the overhead light off. He stated we’d leave the hospital shortly, one pretend dead body at a time. I insisted on Alistair going first, since apparently the reprieve in the intense search wouldn’t last long.

“I have secured a vehicle outside, and it will suffice to get you back to the pier,” he said, keeping his voice to a low whisper. “Your friend, Cheung Sulyn, has already left the hospital under police escort to her apartment on the west side of the city. I took the liberty to slip her a note telling her to meet us at the pier at midnight.”

“We were planning to take care of everything ourselves,” I said, pulling my sheet down far enough to be heard clearly. “I assume we’re taking her grandfather’s yacht again, correct? I’m pretty sure she can’t drive it, and though you and I can pick things up fairly quickly, we haven’t got all night to learn how to drive the damned thing.”

“Judas, you need to trust me,” he said. “My note instructed her to contact her crew and urge them to join us. I’ve offered to double their normal fees in making this trip.”

“Why midnight?” Alistair asked, his voice slightly muffled from under his sheet. “Why not get there as soon as possible?”

“Because druids turn into frogs if they come out too early when the moon is half full,” I said, drawing a hiss from both Roderick and my kid, who pulled down his sheet from his face. “Sorry…I’m sure there’s a good reason for it.”

“You’ll need time to get ready, and it is almost nine-thirty,” said Roderick. “I can tell your progeny needs sustenance.”

Neither Alistair nor I had eaten since that afternoon, and I had heard several rumbles from his stomach while we waited in the room’s darkness for what was to come next. Taking care of that need and planning our next venture to Wong Chuk Kok Tsui could easily bring us to a Tolo Harbour rendezvous at midnight.

“We could use your skills to study the map, Roderick,” I said, since this was an area of his expertise. “Otherwise, we could easily spin our wheels again if we can’t locate the cave entrance.”

“I’ll gladly look over the map, but in light of what we have to work with, I may not fare any better than you in deciphering hidden messages embedded in the text. I’ll know more when I can speak face to face with Ms. Cheung,” he said. “But, we can discuss this later. Cover your face once more, Alistair.”

Alistair complied after offering one final protest about Sulyn waiting for his call. Roderick nipped it in the bud by advising him that he disposed of my boy’s phone and mine in two separate hazardous waste receptacles, since the agency had likely used the devices to track our presence in the hospital. I assumed this was also true for Roderick’s phone, which meant we’d have to reconnect in new ways once this ordeal was over.

He pulled the gurney carrying my son out of the room and quickly shut the door behind him. I worried about Alistair’s welfare in the event he and Roderick were somehow detained, as any parent is prone to do. However, when Roderick returned for me in the next ten minutes, I felt much better about our chances of leaving the hospital undiscovered. With my face cloaked by a thin blue sheet, I said a silent prayer to remain unnoticed as he pulled the gurney out into the hallway.

Listening to hospital employees, patients, and the police officers’ conversations during my journey from the storage room to our waiting vehicle outside the hospital was mildly

entertaining. Very little English or any other European language was spoken. I silently repeated my vow to never again let my language skills deteriorate as they had.

Before long, we exited the hospital. The humid night air crept in under the sheet. I could tell from the engine idling nearby that our getaway ‘car’ was in fact a truck. But, once I was lifted inside and allowed to see my surroundings unencumbered, I was quite surprised to find we’d be traveling to Tolo Harbour in an ambulance.

“Have you lost your frigging mind?”

“It’s not as crazy as you might think,” replied Roderick, climbing into the driver seat. “This is no more conspicuous than the Mazda you ditched earlier. Cedric’s automobile was located via satellite by the time you and I passed each other upstairs.”

“So, in response to that development you decided to steal an ambulance?”

“I prefer to think of it as an extended form of leasing,” he replied, and shot me a pained look that begged me to shut up about it.

“Does this mean we still have to act like corpses in transit until you get us to the pier?” asked Alistair, from under his sheet.

“No…once we get a few blocks away from the hospital it should be safe enough for both of you to sit up. Although, it would be wisest to remain in the back of the vehicle, in case we are stopped for any reason.”

I almost expected a police detail to race after us before we made it through the first intersection beyond the hospital. But, we moved through two traffic lights without any sign of pursuit through the back windows. I began to relax for the first time that evening.

“All right, so let’s talk about what needs to happen so we come away from this next trip to Wong Chuk Kok Tsui with the mantle, and if possible, my coin,” I said, edging closer to the front of the ambulance. “If my gut feeling is correct, we don’t have long before Morrow and Kaslow figure out enough of the puzzle to determine where their prize lays hidden.”

Roderick nodded thoughtfully and offered a cursory glance in response.

“You could very well be right about them deducing the location from what they’ve gathered so far,” he said, his focus on the road ahead. “I sense they’ll actually find it sooner than you think.”

Well that sucks. I figured we had until dawn.

“When do you think they’ll show up?”

He frowned and shook his head. “If you haven’t located the cave in the next few hours, it will be too late,” he said. “And, you might not have that long to locate everything and be able to get the hell out of there before they show up.”

“You make it sound like we’re going solo. Aren’t you coming along? I thought you agreed to look over the map.”

“I still plan to look at it. But then it’s up to you to heed my advice and lead the next expedition by yourself.”

“When is this examination of the document supposed to take place?”

Alistair had crept up to join me, and looked fairly worried as he posed this question. Apparently, he had held the same assumptions as me about Roderick actually coming along to help us locate the cave and the long lost chest holding both prizes.

“If Cheung Sulyn shows up on time, it should give us ample opportunity to review the map,” he said. “In the meantime, your clothes are inside the duffle bag behind the driver seat. Go ahead and get dressed, and I’ll stop at the McDonald’s ahead of us. William, I suggest you eat something as well.”

“Are you serious?”

“It’s going on ten o’clock, and your meal options are dwindling rapidly to nothing.”

“Pops, one meal at a fast food joint won’t hurt you.”

“Well, maybe…. Better not be any damned weddings going on tonight.”

They both looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“Seriously, I saw it on a cable program last week before we left the States,” I said, pausing to look through the windshield. I scanned both sides of the restaurant’s parking lot as Roderick pulled the ambulance up to the drive-thru. No sign of any cops or bad guys yet. “Micky D’s actually does weddings in Hong Kong. It’s pretty frigging popular, too.”

“No shit?”

“No shit, son.”

By the time Roderick placed an order for a sack of cheeseburgers, fries, and a couple of milk shakes, we had dressed in our clothes from earlier that day. Once we had the food inside the vehicle, Roderick drove back onto the main thoroughfare while Alistair and I ate.

“So, are you planning to board Cheung’s yacht to meet with Sulyn and examine the map? Or, did you have some other arrangement in mind?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” A wan smile tugged at the corners of Roderick’s mouth. “It might be better to meet with her away from the ship.”

“You’re making this more complicated than it needs to be, my friend,” I said, which erased his fragile smile. “Just come with us and you can examine the damned thing at your leisure while the ship travels to the cape.”

“I can’t commit to any arrangement yet,” he said, and I could almost feel his torn emotions…regret, anger, and disillusionment. Something had changed since we left the hospital, and in truth, it seemed whatever it was had gotten worse since we picked up our dinner. “Let’s see what develops once I get a view and feel for the area tonight.”

Other than Jesus, Roderick is the most intuitive person I’ve ever known during my extended life. Physical obstacles don’t usually bring him down like this, but issues of the spirit and things that can have a major impact on the human condition weigh heavily upon his heart, mind, and soul. I’ve always thought he would’ve been better suited as a disciple of Christ than yours truly.

Surely, a looming confrontation with a crazy egomaniac and an immortal henchman bent on harming thousands—if not millions—of innocent people would count as a potential global catastrophe for him. Add in the strong possibility of deadly violence directed at all three of us, and voila! It's certainly a recipe for debilitating worry for our druid companion. I'm sure I'd feel just as queasy if I allowed myself to think about it for long. My only worry with Roderick was he might not tell me what he foresees in the stream of consciousness going on around us.

This would be the night to *not* cling tightly to secrets, good buddy.

We took a longer route to reach the pier, and by the time we pulled up close enough to enjoy a clear view of the deck on Cheung Yung-ching's yacht it was almost 11:00 p.m. We were early…but there were lights on inside the salon, indicating someone was already there.

"It looks like the crew from earlier…they're moving to their stations," said Alistair, borrowing a micro set of binoculars Roderick had brought with him. Roderick's natural vision leaves much to be desired, despite the fact his eyes' preternatural appearance. "They couldn't be getting ready to leave this early…or could they?"

He held out the glasses to me, but even without them I saw the men moving about. It did look like they were preparing the ship to depart. I scanned the area, and at first saw no other vehicles. Then I noticed a pair of dark BMWs parked near the limousine that Sulyn's people had picked us up in two days ago.

"She's already here, Pops."

"So it appears," I agreed, frowning. "But, if they're getting ready to leave this early, then something's likely wrong."

Roderick nodded in the dimness. He had already cut the lights to the ambulance while we approached the pier. As soon as we stopped he cut the inside lights, as well.

"We might require outside help," he observed, lightly stroking his beard that had returned to its naturally white shade.

"Only if Sulyn is in trouble. If we find out she is, then we should…."

Alistair didn't finish his statement, and his mouth dropped open as he watched Roderick's Asian disguise continue to fall away. The gold flecks in his lavender eyes were aglow… Roderick was deeply worried.

"It's okay, Ali," I said, patting his shoulder. Without listening to either one's admonitions to stay put, I stepped out of the vehicle. "Let me find out what's going on before we jump to conclusions. Don't follow after me, until I send the signal that everything's clear."

I ignored Alistair's hissed rebuke, and prayed silently Roderick would prevent him from following me. Despite scurrying cat-like and low to the ground, it would be tough to remain invisible since I hadn't worn dark clothing.

The yacht's engine suddenly sprang to life, and I feared it would move away from the pier in the next minute. I stood and sprinted for the ramp not yet disengaged from the ship.

The kid who had been our driver that afternoon appeared atop the ramp. He called to the crewmember closest to him, motioning for the captain to hold off leaving the pier. He turned his attention back to me.

“Come and join us, Mr. Barrow!” he said excitedly. “We are about to take another trip to Wong Chuk Kok Tsui!” He looked beyond me and waved for someone else to join us.

Ah, damn it to hell!…

Alistair had disobeyed my orders and soon joined me at the foot of the ramp.

“I told you to stay put!”

“And, you need my help, so let’s get moving!”

“Where’s Roderick?”

“He said something about contacting ‘The Company’, and said you’d understand what that meant.”

True. But, I certainly didn’t agree with the ‘why’ behind Roderick’s decision to contact the agency’s bigger bosses in D.C.

“Come quickly, Mr. Barrow and his father!” urged the kid, who preferred the name Stephen to his birth name, ‘Jeong Chan Lee’. “The ship is ready to leave!”

I almost grabbed my son’s arm to keep him from climbing the ramp. My gut said it would be the smart thing. Not only did I fail to listen, I ignored the nervous smile on little Stephen’s face. In the glow emanating from the salon, along with the deck lights just turned on, several streams of sweat coursed down both sides of his face. The temperature had become much cooler since sunset, so unless the kid had recently finished a fairly intense workout, his sweat came from acute terror.

“Where is Sulyn?” asked Alistair, as soon as we stepped onto the deck. “Are you okay? Stephen’s your name right?”

No, he didn’t look okay. And, *my* kid should’ve stayed with Roderick. The heaviness in my gut worsened by the second.

Stephen’s hand shook as he disengaged the ramp. Then something whizzed by my head, followed by a sharp ‘thunk’. Alistair and I both turned in time to see Stephen’s lifeless form fall backward into the harbor as the ship pulled away from the pier. He probably never knew what hit him, as his glassy stare was more relaxed than his expression had been before the bullet penetrated his forehead.

“Well, isn’t this nice. The two assholes I’ve looked forward to killing the most have saved me the extra trip to track them down,” said a familiar frigid voice. “But first, how about a little treasure hunt, William and Alistair? Hmmmm? After all, you’re just in time.”

A small curl of smoke rose from the silencer attached to the same Steyr pistol I saw the other night. His luminescent blue eyes made him look even more predatory, or perhaps it was something else beyond the mere physical presence of this fiend. Whatever, my loathing of such profound evil—as well as Alistair’s abhorred expression—seemed to especially please him.

Viktor Kaslow smiled.

Chapter 21

“This is beyond delightful!”

Christian Morrow threw back his head as if giving in to an uproarious fit of laughter. But, he caught himself and angled over to the bar to refill his Scotch on the rocks. My favorite drink, as it has been for more than a century. And, yet, realizing I now shared my preferred beverage with such a loathsome character stripped the luster.

At present, our prospects seemed grim at best. Facing the threat of ending up like little Stephen was enough to ensure Alistair’s and my full cooperation. Kaslow had brought us inside the salon, and I banked our immediate survival on the fact this monster had gone to some trouble as far as keeping things relatively clean. Most of the crew that had accompanied our journey earlier was absent, except for those whose seafaring knowledge was indispensable. I doubted Cheong Sulyn had skimped on that arrangement—especially when traveling at night, as superior navigation and security skills were necessary. Thinking of the terrible fear on Jeong Chan Lee’s youthful face less than twenty minutes ago, the poor kid had likely seen other employees of Sulyn disappear into the harbor in similar fashion to what would happen to him.

“What are you going to do with us?”

Sulyn sounded subdued, broken by the man who had badly disrespected her at the convention. Her upper lip bled. The same telltale swelling and bruises her grandfather bore now covered both cheeks—a sure sign Kaslow marked his conquered turf. Like Alistair and me, her hands were tied tightly behind her. Smaller strands from shredded deck rope had been used to ensure the knots were damned near impossible to break, unless one’s arms were stuffed with steroid-laced muscles.

We were seated on a long couch facing the bar, and two men in dark business suits whom I didn’t recognize kept watchful eyes upon us. Both were of Middle Eastern descent, perhaps Syrian? Kaslow stood by the salon’s main entrance, keeping a watchful eye on the rest of Sulyn’s staff manning the yacht’s bridge. He and his boss were dressed casually in jeans and polo shirts, which did nothing to soften their abrasive personalities. The most expensive Serge Lutens cologne will never cover up the stench of a rotting soul.

Four fiends against the three of us—odds that on occasion have worked out to my favor. Of course, that entailed having one’s limbs free to be used when needed. But there

was also someone else in our presence: Lao Wee Kiat James.

He sat at the opposite end of the bar from Morrow, nursing what looked like a stronger whiskey concoction. He appeared pensive and worried, dressed in what I'd decided was the preferred slovenly business attire he'd worn throughout the week. He shied away from Sulyn's angry glances. No one needed to tell me Mr. Lao was up to his plump dimpled cheeks in this shit. Not only had he betrayed the knowledge of the map and stylus that claimed more than two-dozen innocent lives in a single day, but he assuredly also brought Morrow and his three henchmen to the pier.

"I have yet to decide your fate, little lady," said Morrow, chuckling after taking a long drink from his Scotch. "For now, your distress amuses me, and so it suits me to keep you alive for entertainment. Fear not…I will grow tired of you and your Hong Kong stench—certainly by dawn. You can join the rest of your friends in the sea for all I care."

"Should I assume the same fate awaits the rest of us?"

Alistair sounded just like the 'Big Tam' Connery, and my son's coolness and brazen defiance in his tone greatly impressed me. Morrow said nothing. Instead, Kaslow spoke. Actually, I was surprised Viktor didn't come over and bitch slap my boy for his smart mouth.

"Oh, I wouldn't assume anything at this point, Mr. Barrow," said Kaslow, his tone an unsettling combination of mirth and acid. "You should well understand there are things far worse than mere death."

I felt the chill resonating through Alistair. I doubt my son had told Sulyn anything about the personal horror he endured in Kaslow's 'torture trailer' hidden away in Iran's Alborz Mountains last year. He's never discussed any of it with me either.

"Hasn't your rebirth as an even more wretched monster taught you to fear The Almighty?" I taunted Kaslow, wanting to pull his attention from my son. I silently prayed for a miracle—even just a morsel to give us some leverage. "The emptiness in your soul will grow deeper and deeper until there is no escape from Sheohl."

We needed something, and needed it quickly. Surely Roderick was aware of our predicament, and I wondered what he intended to do about it. He could do little on his own, since we were dealing with an armed immortal that could kill us—and Roderick—with his bare hands if so desired. It would take an entire team of trained assassins to take out Morrow's latest henchmen and stun Kaslow long enough for us to possibly escape.

"William…or rather, *Judas!*" he sneered. "I fear nothing and care even less for your myths and superstitions!"

"Then what do you believe in?" asked Alistair. "If it isn't some spiritual higher power, then you are to be pitied as the most miserable human being ever to walk this earth."

My heart nearly stopped beating. I thought Alistair would be dead in an instant. Kaslow glared at him with his gun's laser sight trained upon my son's forehead. I would've wagered my entire net worth I was about to lose him forever. The wait for what came next turned excruciating. But Alistair remained calm, and his breathing was the opposite of Sulyn's short shallow breaths. He was at peace.

I think if my boy had reacted any other way he would've died right then, likely leaving Sulyn next in line for a bullet hole to the head. Certainly, Morrow already had everything he needed. We were all dispensable.

Alistair's response drew a nervous twitch along the corners of Kaslow's mouth. He lowered his gun.

"Pitied?" he said, snickering. "Perhaps we should show you what no human has seen in eight hundred years, eh? Killing you inside the cave that holds such treasures might bring a more satisfying demise for you three."

"They could be the first to perish from my new toy!" Morrow glared at me especially. "I am told that you, Mr. Iscariot, will be transported into some other place and time if your present body is compromised beyond repair. How about we let you experience a slight demonstration of the mantle's strength to send you on your way? The fate of your son and his new girlfriend will forever remain a maddening mystery for you!"

Now he did laugh. Uproariously.

"I guess that leaves just you, James!"

Mr. Lao suddenly lifted his eyes from the drink he continued to nurse. Kaslow pointed his pistol toward Lao's mid section.

"What?! This is *not* what you promised! I have done everything you asked, and have been a *faithful* servant to you!" he pleaded. When he received no response from his 'boss', other than rolled eyes and a bored expression, Kaslow took a step toward where Lao sat. Lao immediately stood up, knocking over his stool while raising his hands defensively. He looked around madly for help, or more likely someplace to flee. There was nowhere to go. "What about all of the research you had me do that could've cost me my job, or had me killed by Cheung Yung-ching? Kill *them* for getting in your way!"

His shaking hand moved from Sulyn to Alistair, and finally to me.

"You are a *fucking* snake!" she hissed at him. Our diminutive debutante carried admirable bite after all. "Because of your greed, James, my cousins are dead! They were just *children!* Their entire lives were snuffed out because *you* were willing to share our family's secrets with these '*sha shous*'!"

"Step over to the door, or you'll die now," Kaslow told Lao, his voice low and menacing.

With his knees knocking together, Lao followed Kaslow's command while pleading fervently for mercy. Kaslow ignored the cries, pleading, whining, and the small cloud of urine that had darkened the front of Lao's gray pants. Instead, he brought the gun closer and motioned for his next victim to move through the open doorway.

The moon seemed brighter, illuminating the deck and surrounding water as the ship moved up the channel toward the cape. Meanwhile, Lao squeezed his substantial girth through the narrow exit, and I was struck by the absurd irony of how we all cling to the slimmest hope—even if there really isn't any—when our lives are at stake. As soon as he stepped out of the salon, he pleaded even harder. Kaslow put a bullet through his heart and his head and turned back to face us before Lao collapsed dead on the deck. The Russian

wore a bored look, as if he had just deposited the trash outside his home.

The yacht leaving Tolo Harbour eliminated the need to be tidy. There'd be a much bloodier mess in the cave if we didn't experience a miracle before Morrow and Kaslow collected their prize.

"We'll soon reach our destination," Morrow advised, pouring himself another drink. "Would any of you care to join me?"

He raised his glass in salute after the tongue in cheek offer. Those who could've joined him declined, and we three prisoners looked on in silence. Nothing more to talk about, the ensuing silence became awkward. I sensed our 'host' wanted very badly to let us in on some additional secret, but waited for the right moment.

Finally, we reached our destination, as Devil's Fist rose eerily out of the water ahead of us. The infamous marker for Wong Chuk Kok Tsui looked especially menacing beneath the moon's glow.

"Ishtar and Adad, bring our prisoners and the little girl," said Morrow, once the captain brought us close to the shore.

One of the henchmen moved over to a small closet near the bar and opened it. A child no older than eight years was inside, gagged and bound. She had been crying, though I was unaware of her presence on the yacht until that moment. He yanked her forcefully to her feet.

"Let her go, you bastard!" demanded Sulyn, restrained by the other thug. "She's innocent and has nothing to do with this!"

"She might be innocent, but I'm not so sure she has nothing to do with this—especially if her daddy decides to talk," said Morrow, calmly motioning to the captain standing outside the salon, whose face was filled with fear as he peered through the windows. "She will be our insurance policy, since it's a long swim back to the city. I won't need anything other than this vibrant, sweet young child to ensure the boat is waiting for Viktor and me when we return from our little expedition. In the meantime, shut Ms. Cheung up."

Morrow removed Cheung's map from his back pocket, where he had carelessly folded and stuffed it. Sulyn offered a stronger stream of obscenities until a gag over her mouth silenced them.

"And how do you propose to find this place?"

Really, my question wasn't as stupid as one might suppose. After all, we were nearly in the exact same spot we had visited eight hours earlier. What could possibly change if we still had the same map to follow?

Morrow eyed me wickedly. "Ahhh…I'm afraid the map is a better friend to me than to you, Judas."

He pulled out an object from his front pants pocket. Even before Sulyn uttered a muted shriek, I knew it was the stylus mentioned by her and her grandfather. Made from pure gold, it included a brilliant sapphire upon its top. No telling what the damned thing was worth.

“You’re only slightly surprised to see this, I’m sure.” Said Morrow, gleefully. “But, did it ever occur to any of you that it might possess a few more abilities beyond what a normal stylus can do?”

I believe I was the only one to shake my head, though subtly.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter, since each of you are desperately thinking of a way to escape your dismal fate,” he continued. “Since I rarely get to play with anything that doesn’t follow the usual laws of physics, you’ll have to excuse my fascination with a little secret I’m about to share. Watch this.”

His thugs brought us to a table near the door, and on it lay Cheung’s map. Morrow’s carelessness had damaged the corners of the ancient goatskin. But it hardly mattered. Once he sat the stylus on top of the map, it began to vibrate and twirl on its own. As it did, text that was previously invisible suddenly appeared. Mainly it was numbers in Portuguese and Latin, although elements from languages in this part of the world were also included. I’m ashamed to admit I whispered my hunch the numbers looked like measurements.

“Oh, this is going to be so much fun!” beamed Morrow, pleased by my quiet musing. “Since we’ve already done this once tonight, we have the measurements that tell us specifically where to place our hands on the rock wall hiding the cave entrance. Certainly, Judas, from your extensive travels and knowledge of the ancient world, you are familiar with the relationship between *‘chi’*, *‘bu’*, and *‘li’*. Correct?”

I merely nodded. These units have varied over time, so unless Morrow knew the precise era when the map was created, his calculations could be off.

“1520 was the year the map was created, William,” said Kaslow, drawing a sharp glare from me. The sucker had just read my thoughts, and he grinned at my pained expression. “The numbers should be accurate, as you will see in a few minutes. We should go.”

“Yes, I agree.” Morrow gathered the stylus and map and headed for the exit. “Make sure Judas and the other two stay ahead of us, and the kid stays with you, Viktor.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, and immediately left the salon. To get an idea of where my son’s and Sulyn’s mental states were at, I had been quietly observing them through my peripheral. He hadn’t said a word, but Alistair didn’t hide his amazement about the strange stylus and what it revealed upon the map’s face. Sulyn, on the other hand, seemed shaken by what just happened. She obviously hadn’t grasped that Viktor Kaslow wasn’t human anymore, any more than she realized I also was no longer human in the traditional sense. Even so, she surely knew Kaslow was akin to a demon from hell.

Kaslow seemed to grow more impatient once we stepped out onto the deck, and quickly ushered everyone off the ship. The little girl reached out for her father, who tearfully ignored her, as if he fully understood how quickly either one of them could end up dead. I sent a silent prayer for mercy to him and his child, since neither one would likely return to the pier in Tolo Harbour.

“So…this is it,” marveled Morrow, when we arrived at the wall. Despite the moonlight, much of the rock face was shrouded by shadows from taller formations. “You truly have no idea how this thing works, do you, Judas?”

No, Morrow-asshole… I sure don't.

I was about to voice an abridged version of my disrespect, but then he pulled out the stylus again. He quietly mouthed an incantation that matched the words Sulyn and I had struggled to decipher last night when we first handled the map. His rendering of the older Cantonese dialect sounded similar to hers, though his pronunciation was marred by his inexperience with the Chinese language.

The sapphire atop the stylus began to glow, and as it did, a luminescent blue haze emanated from the device. It followed Morrow's fervent push with palms held out in front of him. The haze embraced the wall, and two separate handprints appeared at my chest level, roughly a dozen feet apart from each other.

"Viktor, will you do the honors?"

Morrow pointed to the handprint on the left while he moved up to the one on the right.

"According to my research, finishing the incantation while you and I place our corresponding hands over the marks on the wall will trigger the appearance of the entrance," he advised. "Here goes."

Spoken like a true amateur. But after seeing firsthand the creation of an abomination like Kaslow last summer—an event that happened in the holiest place on earth—I unfortunately understood how easy this hodgepodge approach could work. As it turned out, it worked like a charm.

Once Kaslow and Morrow had placed their hands over the smaller ones that had appeared on the rock face, and Morrow completed his horrendous pronunciation of the five-hundred-year-old words, the ground beneath our feet began to shake. As it did, the rock wall moved aside. Not by much, but enough for a person of average build to step through easily. For Kaslow, the thugs, and myself it was a little trickier squeezing our muscular builds through the opening.

Armed with flashlights, Morrow's latest henchmen led the way. We stood within a fairly large cavern with a ceiling much higher than the one I had seen in my dream. Maybe we had arrived at the wrong place. Yet, I knew beyond all doubt my coin was near, as I could feel the terrible rage it had gathered since the Lord's blood tarnished it and its brothers. If it were an audible response, surely it would be an ear-piercing scream.

A large round disk sat in the middle of the room, roughly five feet in diameter. An intricately carved dragon graced the top.

"This is where the cave entrance should be," said Morrow. "Adad…Ishtar. Come lift this out of the way."

"There's no need," said Kaslow, waving them off. He returned his pistol to the holster under his left arm and squatted in front of the large stone disk. With no more effort than lifting a fifty-pound sack of potatoes, he picked up the disk and tossed it out of the way.

That was clue number three for Sulyn, whose eyes grew wide with amazement. For anyone with limited exposure to the supernatural, a magic stylus, blue haze revealed handprints, and superhuman strength would definitely be a reality bender. But, the real fun had yet to come.

Once the disk was removed, I recognized the stepladder leading down into the darkness below. The flashlights' beams revealed the bottom of the cavern was less than ten feet, or three meters, as Morrow pointed out. The beams also revealed several human skeletons lying haphazardly near the base of the ladder. The bones appeared to have been seared by fire.

Kaslow led the way, showing more caution than I expected. Perhaps he figured the cavern was filled with booby traps. I was ordered down the hole next and noticed the air was stale, but also carried the scent of charred wood and flesh. No one had visited this place since World War II.

"Sheesh! It looks like a small war happened down here," observed Alistair, once he and everyone else had joined us. Identical to what I saw in my dream, the cave was just under five feet in height and maybe fifty feet in width. It opened to several smaller rooms, or passageways.

To my right were rows of stacked chests, and many more skeletons surrounded us. Most were dressed as the Chinese men I had watched race against time to load chest after chest inside this cramped place. However, the remains of roughly a dozen Japanese soldiers were here, too.

They all died here, and the cave was covered so no one could escape….

Morrow directed those of us in bonds against one wall, while he and Kaslow searched for the chest containing the mythic mantle. The coin's blue glow emanated from a chest less than ten feet away. Barely open, I tried to ignore it once I recognized it from my dream the other night. Sadly, Viktor saw it, too.

"Marvelous!"

Morrow eagerly joined Kaslow once the Russian announced he had found my coin. My heart sank and I braced myself for one of them to pull it out and taunt me. Instead, they dug deeper in their search for the vest once belonging to Genghis Khan.

"Found it!"

Like a kid at Christmas, Morrow's smile stretched from ear to ear. He eagerly removed the armored vest and hurried to put it on. I couldn't believe it was a perfect fit, and it seemed to surprise Kaslow, as well.

"You are a fool for ignoring the legends from long ago!" warned Sulyn, angrily, after finally able to spit out her gag. She sat between Alistair and the girl, who clung to her as if she were her birth mother. One of the thugs punched her in the face, but she hid the pain, raising her chin defiantly while twin crimson streams trickled from her nostrils. "Genghis Khan was the *only* one worthy to wear his mantle!"

"Oh, you think so?" Morrow eyed her contemptuously. "Who in the hell made you the expert around here?!"

"It is widely known that the great leader of the Mongols embraced all worthy philosophies on life, including those of the most powerful shamans," she explained, drawing a surprised look from Alistair and a raised eyebrow from me. We both understood she hadn't previously embraced anything dealing with the supernatural. She shot me a

look that begged me to roll with her on this. “The mantle is only for those as worthy as Genghis to wear it.”

“In other words, I’m not worthy? Is that what you’re implying, Ms. Cheung?”

That frigging crazy facial expression again.

“What she means is this: If the mantle was created for good, then it will fail if it falls into the wrong hands,” I said, which was pretty much the same damned thing she told him. Yeah, I couldn’t resist taking a shot at making him feel more like a dumbass.

And, just like that, crazy maniacal became homicidal…at least in appearance. Maybe it was pretty dumb to egg him on, but my instincts were now in full control. I had committed myself to follow them and see if they somehow led me to one solid opportunity to rescue three innocent human beings. I’d gladly sacrifice my life and coin if it would spare Alistair, Sulyn, and the little girl snuggled up against her.

“Well…fuck you both!” he sneered. “And, William, Judas, stupid asshole—whoever you really are, get this: Since your blood-encrusted coin has been sharing a home with the mantle, all of the wickedness you brought into the world has been marinating a device already incredibly powerful. I’ll bet you know nothing of how this thing originated—do you? Have you ever heard of Fushine the Sorceress?”

“Of course, I have, “ I said, trying to clear my thoughts of something I’d just noticed. A fallen Japanese soldier had drawn his sword just before his death. Surprisingly, Kaslow and the other fiends hadn’t noticed the blade sticking upward, still grasped tightly by the boney-gloved hand holding it. Unfortunately, it was too far away to grip the handle from behind. It left no choice other than impaling my hand with the blade and manipulating the blade out of my palm to cut my bonds. “She started out well enough, but was beheaded after her predictions for her emperor were found to be fraudulent.”

“Bullshit! It appears your knowledge is as faulty as your ability to find your coins!”

He was really getting angry. Excellent. A little lie doesn’t hurt when designed for the greater good.

“For your corrected information, Judas, Fushine was a greatly honored practitioner of magic!” Morrow continued, his livid voice unsteady. “Not only that, but she was instrumental in creating the mantle for Mr. Khan. How do you suppose a nomadic warlord rose to such heights so quickly? How does a leader of a few thousand men eventually grow that army to half a million soldiers, and effortlessly conquer nations vastly superior to the early horsemen Genghis Khan assembled? Hell, you were there, Judas, so don’t give us some shit about him picking himself up by the bootstraps and deciding one day to be ‘Emperor of the world.’”

I nodded smugly in response while feeling the worried gazes of Alistair and Sulyn. They needed to trust me. They also needed *not* to look behind us, since I had just impaled my left hand on the sword’s dirty blade. Time to reel it in closer without drawing any attention, despite the searing pain making me want to scream.

“Well, we’re going to have to agree to disagree,” I said, releasing a low sigh, as if this conversation meant no more than a hill of beans to me. Meanwhile, I kept working the

blade through my hand, until several small streams of blood coursed down my fingers. Oh, and I should mention here that since the metal was continuously piercing me like a shish kabob on a rotisserie, I wasn't healing as quickly as usual. "I have the experience of actually meeting that wench. The charlatan bitch got everything coming to her."

In truth, I never met her, and all I ever heard about Fushine was her talent was genuine. But for the moment, I made up an alternate existence for her in my head, just in case Kaslow was peering into my subconscious.

"That's it. That's *fucking* it!" railed the madman. "I'll show you who's right about this! I'm going to demonstrate what this thing can do, now that it's been in bed with your nice little coin—which Viktor has agreed to melt down to a tiny silver wedge to be deposited into the South China Sea! It should keep you busy for the next thousand years trying to recover it. For now, we're done dealing with each other! No more waiting and no more talk!"

No one else fully understood what this ancient armor vest could do. As I mentioned, I had seen the plasma stream rip through the air a few miles beyond the plain of Samarkand, and later the destruction of the city's walls, twenty feet thick. Perhaps Alistair pictured what I'd described to him upon our arrival in Hong Kong, as terrible dread filled his expression.

None of that mattered now. Morrow pulled out a piece of paper from his pants pocket, and prepared to recite another incantation. Kaslow appeared ready to intervene. But no one did. Not until it was too late.

"Prepare to die, assholes!" Morrow shouted, and began his initial chant. The words were rhythmic, and only vaguely familiar. Yet, Sulyn seemed able to follow along.

This is when the party changed—and not just because I managed a secure enough grip to pull the sword near. I could finally slice through the tight bonds upon my wrists. Alistair now noticed what I was doing, and had the good sense to keep his attention on Mr. Morrow. It soon became impossible to do anything else.

"Oh, my God, this feels amazing!" he exclaimed, pulling his attention from his chanting exercise. He drew a deep breath as if enjoying unfathomable power within. "Maybe I'll hang on to this for a while…maybe I'll double my asking price! Hell, maybe I'll…What in the….?! *Oww!* What's going on! *Owww!"*

As he had hoped, the incredible energy that once aided Genghis Khan in his quest to rule the world began to seep out toward us as a purplish haze. Even in its infancy, the haze's energy was dangerous, igniting Marrow's incantation paper and thus ending the chant. As I worried his threats against us were about to come true, the haze emanating toward us began to withdraw. At the same time, the vest began to shrink. We watched in horror as it crushed Christian Morrow's torso and squeezed the very life out of him.

It wasn't a quick death, and as he screamed in unspeakable agony, his writhing body rose into the air and started to spin. Kaslow tried to grab onto his arm, but was easily thrown off. Stunned by the first successful rebuff since becoming an immortal, he tried to save his shrieking employer once more, and was thrown back much further the second time.

I needed the distraction to finish filleting my bonds. Determined to ignore Sulyn's look of incredulous fascination while the gaping hole in my palm closed up and healed in under a minute, I worked furiously to free my son from his restraints. Kaslow and the two mortified Middle Eastern henchmen eventually returned their attention to us. Fortunately, it didn't happen until Sulyn's and the little girl's bonds were severed.

We had to get the hell out of there quickly. Kaslow now noticed we were free from bondage. But instead of picking us off one by one, like tin ducks at a carnival, he was compelled to watch the terrible transformation of Christian Morrow into a burning, spinning blade of purple fire.

Assuredly Morrow was dead. Then again, in a world filled with various kinds of immortality, who truly knew? The spinning purple torch that once was a man spun faster and faster. Suddenly, the earth beneath our feet began to give way.

In terms of our immediate survival, this latest development was a very good thing. At least for Morrow's three former prisoners and Kaslow, who had been thrown far enough from the room's center to avoid the collapse of the cave's floor into a churning whirlpool of darkness. Morrow's thugs, however, tumbled headfirst into the violent seawater churning upward.

Part of the ladder was gone, broken off at the midway point when the floor disappeared. My son and Sulyn managed to lift the girl to safety, and she scurried up the remaining ladder steps without looking down into the deepening chasm below. Meanwhile, I searched for a better means to get my kid and Ms. Cheung out of there in one piece.

I scurried to a pile of old ropes, but Kaslow blocked my path. Too fast and too strong to elude, he easily knocked me to the floor and pushed me toward the expanding chasm.

The swirling light grew even more intense, and I heard the anxious shouts from my son and Sulyn as the rest of the cave floor fractured around us. A horrible development, except for the sudden blast of air that knocked Kaslow back to the edge of the cave. If I'd been standing with him, I likely would've found myself partially wedged into a wall crevice as he was then.

"Grab the rope, Pops, and let's get out of here!" shouted Alistair.

The brilliant light exploded into millions of tiny purple dots that filled the air. Their luminance remained bright, allowing me to clearly see my surroundings. The floor continued to crumble into the growing chasm, and the water lapping the edges hastened the deterioration. But I also saw the rope bundles mentioned by my son. I heard Kaslow groan and knew he'd soon free himself from the wall.

"I need something to secure the rope above us!" I said, moving past Kaslow to where the aged rope bundles sat. I picked up three of them and hurried back to where Sulyn and Alistair anxiously waited.

"There's nothing heavy enough lying around here that would work for a weight to tie the rope to," my boy lamented. *"Shit!"*

"Hold on…this might work!"

I noticed the chest that recently contained the mantle and still held my precious coin. It was lying near the edge of the hole in the room's center. Being careful, I quickly pulled it up by its lid and brought it over to where the others waited. Alistair had taken the least rotted rope bundle and created a big enough noose and knot to secure the chest. But before I let him finish his work, I reached in and grabbed my coin.

For those unfamiliar, every time I track down one of my blood shekels, I'm forced to relive Jesus' pain and suffering that I had a major hand in creating. The blood and sweat that covered his broken body smells more pungent than the time before, and it's as if I am in Jerusalem to witness his torture and death all over again. His probing gaze finds me in the crowd after the crown of thorns is placed upon his head. As most of you can imagine, it's too much to bear and I break down and cry like a young child in agony—especially when I see him mouth the words, 'I forgive you, Judas, son of Simon.'

I experienced all of this again right then…so much worse than before. The latter coins are far more excruciating than the earlier ones. But, this wasn't a time where I could let the experience wash over me as it's intended to do. Not with two precious lives hanging in the balance and another younger life waiting for us in the room above.

"Let's get going—we're almost out of time!"

I stuffed the coin in my trousers and shut the chest, praying what was left inside would prove heavy enough to secure the rope. We needed it to anchor above us long enough to scale the ladder's remnants without fear of falling to certain death below.

Alistair and I quickly secured the rope to the closed chest, and I tossed it up to the next level. Sulyn was the first to climb up, scarcely relying on the rope to get her there. Alistair was next, and he almost fell into the churning water that continued to claim pieces of the fractured floor. I sent a prayer of thanks heavenward once he climbed to safety.

That left just me, and true to form, it wasn't an easy process of getting from point A to B. Part of the reason was the same thing that Alistair had encountered, when the chest above slid all the way up to the opening above. Then the ladder's ancient wood began to splinter.

"Pops, look out!"

A powerful hand grabbed my foot as I tried to pull myself through the hole. Kaslow had freed himself from the rock crevice, and was now the only thing standing in my way. He clung to the rope to steady himself, and at any moment the fragile floor pieces he balanced himself on would give way. All it would take for me to join him was one solid tug. One more tug and then adios for this body.

No more William Barrow, and Judas Iscariot would once again be transported to some other place and time.

Kaslow's sardonic chuckle reverberated throughout the room. As I reflect now on this event, I can't decide if it was his arrogant knowingness or his Steyr's gleaming silencer that enabled me to summon a higher physical prowess than I'm accustomed to having. In any case, I kicked him in the head as hard as I could with my other foot, ignoring the fear he would pull me with him as he slipped into the chasm.

Being an inexperienced immortal, he was likely surprised by my sudden power and let go. Unlike most people about to die, Viktor shouted a promise to me. It was a promise of revenge…a promise of death, and delivered with even more venomous hatred than I thought he carried for me. With that level of malice, I had no doubt he'd find his way back someday.

Probably soon.

Chapter 22

"So, when do you plan to see Mother?"

"Just as soon as we get off this frigging plane at Dulles."

Another long flight, this one seemed much worse than the trip out to Hong Kong had been. Of course, on that trip we had stopped in Hawaii for a few days and shortened the journey to China by stopping in Japan for one night. However, on our way back home we skipped most of that, stopping over for a matter of hours in both Tokyo and Honolulu. Then there was an emergency stopover in Denver before continuing on to D.C.

But, enough about the technical aspects of our journey back to the States. Surely everyone would rather hear about the events that transpired after Viktor Kaslow disappeared into the churning abyss inside the cave at Wong Chuk Kok Tsui. Correct?

Assuming that's the case, I should finish most of my update by the time our plane lands in Washington. Once we land at Dulles and pick up our car, then it's off to see Beatrice, despite our exhaustion and irritation. Really, it's exhaustion for Alistair, and irritation for me, since I've had nearly thirty hours in the air to think about what to do about my exposed identity. I mean, how many people know I'm not really William Barrow, anyway?

It's an annoyance for another time and different story.

As for Kaslow…once he landed in the volatile murkiness, the miniature purple lights quickly dissipated. The cave below cast into complete darkness, the only sounds were of water splashing against the ancient chests stored there.

"Are you all right?"

My question was intended for all three companions, though directed most to the little girl. She nodded and offered a weak smile. I could only imagine the long-term aftereffects from what she had witnessed the past few hours. She had been present for at least one murder, according to Sulyn. That alone would traumatize most kids. Adding the

experience of watching Christian Morrow get crushed and ignited supernaturally could certainly breed horrific nightmares.

“We will eventually be all right,” said Sulyn. She carried a small flashlight that looked like it came from a convenience store. Her beautiful eyes were dulled, which told me her soul may have suffered permanent damage…at least for this lifetime. “But Sha Fen Wan won’t ever forget this…neither shall I.”

I wanted to tell her how truly sorry I was again, though I feared it would come across as insincere.

“Sha Fen Wan?”

“Yes…that’s her name.”

“Sounds pretty.” I smiled at the little girl and her smile widened. Maybe she’d be okay much more quickly than either Sulyn or myself assumed.

“We should go…from the sound of things below us, the water’s rising,” said Alistair.

“Okay, Ali, you’re probably right…let’s get out of here.” I could see a slim sliver of moonlight less than thirty feet away, marking our exit to the outside world again. “Were there any other hoodlums we should know about, Sulyn?”

“No, it was just the two of them and Mr. Kaslow…. So, you really are Judas Iscariot? That would make you—”

“Two thousand and fourteen years, two months and seventeen days young, to be exact.”

It wasn’t the first time I’ve given a glib response to that question, and truly I didn’t intend to come across as an ass. Sulyn gave me an indifferent nod, as if the question and its answer were merely polite conversation. But then I saw her pull the girl closer to her protectively. She was more than a tad freaked out by my true identity.

Nothing more was said, until after we stepped through the crevice in the rock wall. I thanked The Almighty it hadn’t closed back up yet. But the yacht was nowhere to be found.

“*Shit!* What are we supposed to do now!”

I shared my boy’s frustration. The ship was long gone, without another boat in sight. However, a dark helicopter sat on the shoreline roughly one hundred feet away from us. Not knowing if it came with friends, strangers, or someone new with bad intent, I urged everyone to follow me over to a nearby ledge with a cleft beneath it deep enough to shelter us all.

“There’s no need to run and hide, Willie Boy!”

“Cedric?”

At first I didn’t see him, until he stepped out from the shadows. The casual stride of Agent Tomlinson moved toward us.

Still, I remained cautious. Despite Roderick’s assurances that Cedric remained my friend, how could I truly be certain? Especially, as I relived our last encounter and how his

wild, angry eyes almost obliged me to kill him in order to protect Alistair.

“He and I have already cleared the air about what happened, William,” said another familiar voice.

Roderick’s taller frame joined Cedric and the pair approached us together. The moon’s light had begun to wane as the night ruler continued its course toward the western horizon. Yet, it was still bright enough to cast an eerie glow upon my best immortal friend’s stark white features. If not for his generous smile, it would appear a deadly blood drinker had stopped by for a midnight snack. Little Sha uttered a whimper and Sulyn did nothing to soothe her fears. Truly she shared them.

“Please, all of you have nothing to fear,” advised Cedric. “The chopper’s ready to take us back to the city. So, if you’ve got the Mantle of Genghis Khan with you, we can get the hell out of this place before Morrow or Kaslow cause us any more problems.”

“Morrow’s dead and Kaslow might be,” I said, feeling secure enough to step into the moonlight. “As for the mantle you seek…it disintegrated when Morrow tried to wear the damned thing. Whatever’s left of it is somewhere back there, in an angry whirlpool you might want to avoid.”

I pointed to the small entrance in the wall, surprised to see it closing. I briefly worried Kaslow had already returned to exact the revenge he threatened. Then I caught the slight bluish glow emanating from where Sulyn stood. Holding the golden stylus, she was pointing its sapphire tip at the wall.

“The abomination must remain hidden forever.” There was resolution in her voice, though it remained hushed. “The stylus and map should be locked away, or maybe they should be destroyed….”

“May I?”

Cedric took a careful step toward her, as if afraid she’d toss the stylus into waves presently lapping the shore.

“No, you may not,” she said, lifting her chin. It wasn’t so much defiant as steadfast, and surely based on her family’s heritage. “There is no need for anyone to handle these items, they are safest with me.”

Cedric didn’t force the issue. Even so, as the helicopter sped toward the heart of Hong Kong, he kept a vigilant eye on Ms. Cheung and the map-wrapped stylus resting on her lap.

“I’m sorry that I almost killed you,” I told him, drawing his gaze. He and Roderick sat across from the four of us. “Next time you have a bone to pick, and the agency views my life as expendable, please lay things out plainly so I don’t have to guess. Without knowing your intent—and considering the fact you were carrying a Beretta—I had no choice but to take you out.”

“Yeah, my neck is still hurting,” he said, tenderly massaging his esophagus. He studied me, wearing a wan smile. “All right…next time I’ll remember. So, are you willing to come back and resume your part-time status?”

“Will Alistair’s and my name remain on the ‘disposable’ list?”

“Hell, no, man! I made sure the two of you were cleared before Roderick and I went looking for ya’ll tonight.” His brow furrowed playfully, he chuckled. “Everything will be as it once was, man—the way things used to be.”

No, he was definitely wrong about that. Things could never be the same. Even if my former employers treated me as they once did, and pretended they knew nothing of my identity as Judas, the very fact *I* knew they were aware would be enough to ensure a laborious and volatile marriage between us.

“I’m going to pass on the offer for now,” I said, ignoring his look of disbelief—the initial step in the sales effort to overcome my objection. “Maybe someday I’ll feel differently.”

“Why not give it some serious thought over the next few weeks, William?” said Roderick, drawing a startled glance from Sulyn. Her eyes grew wide and she shook her head slowly. No doubt, she struggled with a voice that simultaneously sounds as if it’s in front of her while emanating from behind her head. “You’re finally free of Viktor Kaslow. He *is* dead.”

“Maybe not…he made it back the last time. He could do it again.”

Roderick and Cedric nodded thoughtfully, their signal to let the issue ride for now. Sulyn nodded as well, while my son looked out the helicopter’s window at the city’s gorgeous skyline. He and she favored my point of view.

Nothing more was said for the rest of the trip into the city. When we landed atop one of the taller bank buildings, we were quickly ushered inside. There wasn’t much time afforded to say goodbye to Sulyn. For her own ‘protection’, she and Sha Fen Wan were whisked away by local Chinese authorities apparently on good terms with the agency. Alistair worried what might become of our new friend, should the local Hong Kong government become interested in the ancient map and stylus in her possession.

Within the hour, our luggage and other personal belongings were loaded onto a private jet and we headed back home. Cedric and Roderick stayed behind to make sure any other unforeseen loose ends from this fiasco were neatly tied up.

Neither one ever asked about blood coin number twenty-three. It remained in my wallet, where I didn’t have to touch it again. I don’t believe I could’ve maintained my composure had I endured the images of my Lord’s torture and death a second time that night.

* * *

“Well, if it isn’t the Barrow boys!”

Just after 9:00 a.m. Sunday morning. Larisa Jones, my wife’s nurse for the past six years, greeted us warmly.

“Hello, Larisa,” said Alistair, stepping over to give her a hug. “We didn’t get a chance to bring you the souvenir I promised, but I’ll make it up to you very soon. How about I treat you to lunch later this week?”

“I think that’ll work just fine!”

Her golden brown eyes lit up. She had recently turned fifty-four, but the fact she has nary a wrinkle in her smooth ebony skin and her hair remains jet black makes her look several years younger than Cedric. Never one to worry too much about her weight, she looked as though she’d lost a little of it since we saw her the week before last. But to pay a compliment that can be taken the wrong way, most fellas will get it wrong.

Not me.

“You look fantastic, Larisa!” I said, adding the charming smile I’m usually known for. In this case, it was one hundred percent genuine. “What’s going on in your life that’s so good?”

Of course she wouldn’t tell me, but a sincere compliment goes a long way for anyone’s self-esteem.

“Just keeping a good eye on your grandmother, William,” she said. “And, if you think I’m looking good, just wait until you see Beatrice!”

My heart quickened. Along the way home, Alistair and I had rehashed our Hong Kong experiences a few times, since we like to share different perspectives to better ensure accurate perception of events. Not to mention this time we were going to start keeping a diary/journal to go along with the discovery of each coin—something we intend to do going forward. For much of the plane ride, we talked only about Cheung Sulyn and Amy Golden Eagle. We never spoke a word about Beatrice, until my comment as our plane began its final approach to Dulles airport. Since her healing is taking longer than Alistair’s, I’m afraid of saying anything that might jinx the process. I know, it’s a stupid superstition, but one I’m reluctant to let go.

As for my son’s flirtations with Ms. Cheung, they were easy to dismiss. Though we both will try to keep tabs on this wonderful woman, Amy’s the right gal for my son. I would’ve never believed such a thing could be healthy when it was a sixty-two-year-old man in love with a woman almost young enough to be his granddaughter, at twenty-eight. But, like him, she’s getting younger from her share of crystals from the Tree of Life. The physical arrangement between them now is a twenty-five year-old woman paired with a middle-aged man—a man who’ll likely be as young as her in the next few years. Very doable. Besides, who am I to criticize anything, when I seduced his mother at the age of nineteen hundred and fifty four?

“Are you okay, William?” asked Larisa. Her face quickly clouded with worry. “It’s that jet lag getting to you, huh?”

“Yeah…yes, I think so,” I said, drawing a worried glance from my son. He looked a little irritated with me, and who could blame him? I should be ecstatic to see my wife, the very love of my life. “I’d really like to see her.”

“Your grandmother is gonna be thrilled to see you both!”

The light of God returned to her countenance. If anyone doubts The Almighty resides in the hearts of men and women, they need to take a trip to Virginia and meet Larisa Jones.

“Come on now…I’m sure she’s gonna be really pleased to see you’re back safe and sound!”

I don’t remember the last time walking down a hallway made me feel this nervous, and in a good way. It wasn’t some rehashed Karma from the fourteenth century, when the early versions of the Inquisition sought to find and execute me. But, if the love of my life were to reject me—and rightfully so, after I deserted her with a kid so many decades ago—then I might as well be facing the Tribunal of the Holy See.

Larisa knocked on the door of Room 1F.

“Beatrice? I have a couple of visitors to see you.”

Up until a few months ago, Beatrice wouldn’t have possessed the mental presence to realize someone was knocking on her door. But, since March, she had gotten used to standard politeness, and soon preferred it to her nurse barging into her room with only a slight warning.

Steady footsteps coming to the door. That was new. Alistair and I exchanged nervous glances before watching the latch click and the door open.

“Who’s come to see me?”

“It’s me, Mom, and I brought William with me,” said Alistair.

My son’s approach was tentative, since sometimes she recognized him and sometimes she didn’t. If she acknowledged Alistair, then chances were good she’d accept my presence. If not, I might as well have been a janitor coming to empty the small trash can by her bed.

“William?” she repeated, and raised her eyes to meet mine.

Oh my God…does she see me?

It could make sense…maybe the crystals were working faster. In just a week and a half since our last visit, she seemed a little younger. Was it just a few months that had disappeared from her age?… Or, maybe a year or two? Or, even more?

She had walked to the door without her normal shuffle. The walker remained in the corner by her bedside. But, that wasn’t the thing that got me. Nor was it the few strands of strawberry-blonde hair taking up residence next to the white ones. Not even the fading liver spots, or suppleness returning to her facial skin and the plumpness in her previously sallow cheeks. No, not even the fact her back had strengthened and she looked a little taller than before. None of that.

It was the eyes. They were fully green again, and gorgeous.

She studied me with a knowing look.

I tentatively approached her to offer the hug that a grandson gives his grandmother, fighting the urge to take her more passionately in my arms. Too early for that, she’d need to forgive me first for what I’d done before I could ever cross that line again.

I nearly cried when she embraced me, and at first I thought it was me who was shaking. But it was Beatrice. She shook, and I heard sniffles as she buried her face into my shoulder. For the first time in centuries I absolutely had no clue what to do next.

“Well, are you going to keep these young men standing out in the hall, Bea?”

I was glad for Larisa’s prompt and the warm, heartfelt laughter that followed. It gave me a moment to try and regain my composure. Slowly, my love pulled herself away, and then looked up into my face with tear-streaked eyes.

“Are you who I think you are?”

That’s all it took to break through my façade.

Now I was the one crying. That’s all I could do. A man who possessed the death skills coveted by many nations over the centuries could do nothing else.

Of course, I want to be ‘right’ with The Almighty, and atone for what I did to my Lord so long ago. And, while I’m still here and can make a difference, I want the world to be a better place for everyone.

But what I desire and yearn for more than anything is to love my son and be fully united again with my wife—the everlasting love of my life.

“*Yes!*…yes, I am!” I managed to get out between sobs. “It *is* me! I am *him*…William!”

I felt my son’s grip on my shoulder as he moved to hug me from the side, and through my tears I saw Larisa smile lovingly at me. Too afraid to look ahead, I forced myself to do it anyway. Once I did, Beatrice reached up and kissed the tears on both cheeks. Then she took me in her arms and embraced me as her man.

“I have *so* missed you!”

All three of us stepped into her room, and Larisa closed the door behind us. Regardless of what dangers lurked ahead, and whether or not Viktor Kaslow would come calling again someday, in the meantime I had what mattered most, and I held them close. Close to me, where I could love and protect them.

Could this be a new beginning to a life I’ve long pined for?

I certainly hope so.

The End

To be continued in:

Destiny of Coins

The Judas Chronicles, Book Three

Available now.

(Please read on for a sample.)

Chapter 1

The heavy, gray mist hovering above D.C. had become an impenetrable blanket of gloom for the past four days. Thanksgiving would be here in less than a week, and I daresay the upcoming holiday was the only thing keeping the city from falling into a serious funk. In the past, I would have welcomed such melancholy, since for centuries it had acted as a balm to ease the loneliness of my sentence to walk the earth largely alone. But the light that had entered my life years ago in Glasgow, Scotland after World War II had returned to me in this second decade of century twenty-one. Beatrice. Beatrice, whom I once deserted foolishly in fear of happiness, had given me a new lease on life. Or, perhaps more accurately, a new perspective on what it takes to be truly happy.

We are together again. And, although there are moments of awkwardness between us as we become fully acquainted once more, there is incredible joy. Joy fed by a profound love that has always mystified me by its strength and ability to consume all that is negative and change it into something truly positive.

Why do I wax so eloquently about my dear wife and what she means to me? Well, for starters, I am deeply in love with her. Not to mention, two and a half years ago I expected to lose her to old age, as she withered away in her nursing home bed. She is healing now, and seems to all who meet her to be a miracle at eighty-seven, when she doesn't look a day over sixty. Such is the benefit of owning a handful of crystals once part of the Tree of Life, which is now forever reburied in the remote mountains of Iran.

Of course, as the man whom most people assume is her grandson, I'd surely raise many more disbelieving eyebrows to consider my next birthday will be number two thousand and sixteen. Especially, since I occasionally still get carded at the local liquor store, which sits just around the corner from our son Alistair's penthouse condo the three of us share, along with his girlfriend, Amy Golden Eagle.

This brings us to the other reason I've been thinking about my dear wife and what she means to me. I was on my way to the aforementioned liquor store to meet a friend I hadn't

spoken to in nearly a year. He sounded worried on the phone, and in a predetermined code from long ago, he had directed me to meet him in the very back of Allegiance Wine and Spirits.

“You’re looking good, Judas,” said Roderick Cooley, as he surveyed the array of chilled lagers in the store’s refrigerated section. “Or, should I be addressing you still as ‘William’, the name you hated when I first gave it to you in 1908?”

“Only people under the age of one hundred and ten years get to call me William,” I joked, extending my hand to take his. As expected, we gave each other a hug with hearty back slaps. I had missed him more than I realized. “I’ll always be ‘Judas’ to you, and you shall always be ‘the pale faced druid’ to me.”

He chuckled while casting a casual glance toward the front of the store.

“There is happiness in you that I don’t readily recall ever seeing before,” said Roderick. “Beatrice’s recovery must be coming along famously.”

He reached toward the bottom of the open case before him, pulling out a twelve-pack of Killian’s Red. I had assumed he would reach instead for the bottled ale from his Irish homeland instead of an Americanized version.

Roderick is almost as old as me, joining the immortal ranks when a druid ritual, designed to keep the Romans at bay, failed to take his life in a frigid black-water bog. He emerged at sunset that winter solstice very much alive from the ordeal supposed to drown him. Instead, his skin and hair had permanently turned white as snow, and his brilliant blue eyes forever after contained golden flecks floating within his irises. Very disturbing to witness for most people, I’m sure. It’s the reason he wears sunglasses when venturing out in public. As for his vampire-like complexion, he has resorted to a number of remedies down through the centuries to camouflage that aspect. Lately, the wonders of MAC products have given him the upper hand on his pale affliction.

“You’ll love Beatrice, when you finally meet her in person,” I assured him. “If I had known you were coming earlier, you could join us tonight for dinner at The Inn at Little Washington. I’m sure it won’t be a problem getting your name added to the reservation.”

He nodded thoughtfully and looked away. For him to make the six-hour drive from his historic estate nestled in the western corner of Virginia to Washington, he had to have an urgent reason for doing so. Something was up. Something big.

“Perhaps, I shall,” he said. “But after hearing the news I’ve chosen to deliver in person, you may decide to spend this night with your dear wife, as well as your boy and his girlfriend, without my intrusion.”

I carefully scanned the entire store, making sure to be nonchalant. We had foregone our usual precautions, such as encrypted texts and emails, in exchange for a brief phone call. Now, it seemed to warrant extra scrutiny to make sure we were unnoticed by all who passed.

“What’s up?” I asked.

My mouth suddenly felt like sandpaper. My intuitions had been heightened for the past few days. Something nagged at me from the back of my mind, though until this moment I

wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

“How closely have you been following the international news?”

“Not too much…just mainly the events highlighted on MSNBC every night, and the Yahoo scroll on my laptop,” I said, fearful he might sense the ruse covering the hours I had spent trying to get details on one particular event.

“Hmmm…doubtless you’re aware of the bomb blast that killed two cardinals at the Vatican,” he said. “It’s hard to notice every terrorist attack these days. But this one claimed the lives of nearly a dozen other clergy working in the archives when the bomb exploded, making it hard to ignore.”

Bingo!

“Yes, I remember reading the tagline on that one.” I turned my attention to the refrigerated Guinness Extra Stout. Might need a few of these fairly soon.

He laughed, drawing my gaze back to him. I hated the fact I couldn’t see his eyes’ expression behind protective lenses.

“What?” I asked.

“Why do you play this game with me?”

Roderick’s voice had been muted, but suddenly surrounded me. Doubtless, I had spurred his ire by being coy.

“Meaning what?”

My turn to draw him out…. We should quit the charade, this dance around the pink elephant that had just emerged between us.

“All right,” he said, allowing a slight smile to tug at the corners of his thin lips. “I’ll spell it out, since you already know why I’m here. Plus, I’ll give you details your limited access to ‘need to know’ information has prevented you from finding in your searches. The archives wing that was destroyed once housed a precious collection of journals, diaries, and other ancient tomes from the Franciscan order. They spanned from the mid-thirteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century. Beyond priceless, it’s been assumed nearly all of them were destroyed in the blast. We would have been content to allow this conclusion if not for a certain image caught by three of the surviving security cameras.”

“No, it can’t be…. Viktor Kaslow?”

I didn’t want to believe it, and I shook my head in disbelief. I had watched an enormous whirlpool swallow my archenemy and carry the bastard somewhere deep inside the earth, far below an island cave just outside Hong Kong. That was seventeen months ago. Even as immortals go, surviving something so intense is unheard of.

“Yes,” Roderick confirmed. “Viktor waited to make sure the camera caught his face, and then he smiled. No doubt, he knew we’d eventually see it, and *you* would see it, as well.”

“What do you think this means?” I asked quietly, drawing close to him as another

patron, an elderly man, approached the beer and ale refrigerator. We wouldn't have much longer to talk here.

"In and of itself? Hard to say." Roderick glanced casually away from the man, stopping to stare at the customer in the fedora, wearing sunglasses and his *Deep Throat* style trench coat. Roderick waited for the man to move past us before continuing. "I can't give you all the details, but one of the diaries in the Vatican's possession once belonged to Giuseppe de la Serna, a Franciscan missionary who visited Bolivia in 1573. Do you know of him?"

"No," I lied. I'd heard the name, and had a vague recollection he had sparked my interest several centuries ago. So, technically, I was telling the truth.

"He witnessed one of your coins…and I believe you know which one."

"Ah, yes," I said, hoping my sudden increased heart rate remained unknown to Roderick's keen sensitivities. "I'm aware of it. The one that rings."

He chuckled sadly, and I had no doubt he shared my apprehension about this particular coin. "They call it the 'Singing Coin'. Only the most holy individuals can hear it," he said. "But, other documents I surveyed long ago in La Paz say it can also be heard by the most wicked souls."

"You think Viktor is going after the coin?"

"Yes."

"But, he'll never find it…only the Essenes know where it is."

"And you," he said, his tone serious. "You and Giuseppe, who in 1574 found their remote castle nestled in the Andes."

My chest constricted. The ramifications of Roderick's revelation were many…too many for me to begin to sort out. He gently grasped my arm to keep me from collapsing. Roderick is aware of what this particular coin means to me, and my aversion to retrieving it. For numerous reasons I had been saving it for last, to be blood coin number thirty.

"My brother, let us pay for our liquor and finish our conversation outside," he said, picking up the six-pack of Guinness I had my eye on earlier, along with his Killian's. "I'll tell you the rest of why I'm here, and what it is you and I must do."

* * *

Once inside Roderick's Z4, I thought the only distraction would be the steady rain, turning to sleet, as it pounded the ragtop. But, the swirling thoughts that had assaulted me inside the liquor store had yet to subside.

"Don't panic yet, Judas," said Roderick, relaxing in the driver seat. "We have time to take care of this."

I nodded in silence, wondering where Viktor was at that very moment. Would he go directly to Bolivia? Or, could he be on the way to America's capitol with evil intent toward me, or those closest to me?

"He's not coming here…yet," said Roderick, obviously privy to my thoughts. The usual guards protecting the fortress of my mind were disabled. It would be an excellent opportunity for my long time friend to pillage the hidden reserves I've shared with no one. He smiled wanly and shook his head. "You should know me better, old friend. If you were naked, I'd hand you clothing rather than gaze upon you. So, why would I do that to your mind?"

"Okay…you're right." I nodded my gratitude, as his words rang true. "Knowing you, you've already got a plan. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Well…what is it?"

"First, there's more," he said. "Bishop Ramon Espinoza from the Archdiocese in La Paz has been kidnapped. Surely, you realize these two events must be related. Viktor's smug smile showed up in a camera image from a drugstore near the cathedral that was accessed by our CIA operatives who traveled to La Paz from Venezuela, following up on Espinoza's disappearance."

I was speechless. Viktor had gone from nowhere to everywhere in just a matter of days. He had a plan, as well, and I worried Roderick's plan might be a dollar short and a day too late to make a difference in the end.

"Not if we leave tomorrow morning. If we leave early enough, we might reach the castle before Viktor does," he said, pausing to scan the parking lot. Apparently satisfied our privacy remained un-breached, he continued. "Remember, Viktor must actually find the castle and then hunt for the coin. In addition to the priceless Torah and Talmud scrolls, and golden statues the Essenes keep in their castle, your coin is the most sacred relic they hold. It's been safely hidden since Yael Mordecai learned of Giuseppe's diary in 1686. I had a close relationship with this particular Essene, who served as Superior for the Bolivian tribe from 1662 until he was assassinated in La Paz in 1703."

For a moment, Roderick's voice sounded hollow from the grief he touched upon. It's another unfortunate quality he shares with me. We always feel deeply about those whom we care the most. For our mental outlook, it's vitally important to not reminisce long about those no longer with us.

"So, you are certain it's safely hidden?"

"Yes…and I'm just as certain I can find it," he said. "I know how Yael thought, and I remember the secret vaults he favored in the castle's spires."

"Hmmm…I see."

Well, not really. Since I had never seen the castle, I could offer no more than a slight hope he was correct in assuming my coin was protected. Yes, I had known for centuries it was being held in Bolivia. In truth, my reason for saving this particular coin for the very last was that it would likely bring the worst emotional pain compared to any of my other

coins. My assumption is largely based on the story following this coin. They all have tales, just as they all bring curses. But this one became tainted before my Lord's arrest and subsequent execution.

As I tried to picture this castle I had long heard legends of, I thought of the genesis dooming this coin to be the worst of the thirty. Truly, it was an event so simple in its clumsiness it seems unbelievable it happened at all. The messenger from Caiaphas handed me the bag of coins outside the courtyard where Jesus preferred to meditate by Himself. I am ashamed to confess I was spying on His location inside the sprawling complex that belonged to Simon Zelotes. History has mistakenly portrayed the betrayal event to take place in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. But it isn't true. We prayed there and then returned to Simon's house.

I was spying to make sure the Lord was where I had advised Caiaphas He would be, and I grew impatient as the messenger, Caiaphas's guards, and the Roman troops were late in their arrival. Jesus had finished His meditation and was returning to the main house when the messenger ran over to me. I could see the Romans circle the courtyard, blocking my Lord's return to safety. Meanwhile, the messenger, in his haste to pay the fee agreed upon, shoved the leather bag filled with thirty silver shekels at me. The bag fell open. One coin escaped, and as it hit the stone walkway and bounced away, Jesus stopped and turned toward the sound.

"Judas?"

I had lowered myself against the wall, and I seriously doubt He could see me. But He knew I was there, hiding like a coward. Meanwhile, the other disciples came running out. The coin had rolled out of reach of me safely collecting it. Fearing being discovered, I shrank back from the courtyard and disappeared into Simon's vineyard with the bag, now one coin short. The commotion that followed brought even more remorse. The Romans were beating Jesus. Beating Him as they dragged Him away in chains! He would not get the unbiased trial Caiaphas had assured me would happen. I realized I had made a terrible mistake….

"Judas? Snap out of it, man." Roderick nudged me.

"Huh? Look, I'm sorry…. Just a bad memory."

"Of what?"

"It's not important," I tried to assure him. "You were saying something about a map and a church. Right?"

I couldn't fully concentrate while memories of the very worst night of my entire existence played out for what must be the ten thousandth time. Thankfully, it was only the second time in the past two centuries. But I had hoped to avoid the experience until the other twenty-nine coins had been recovered.

I never dreamed it would come early.

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The Cades Cove Series, Book One

(Please read on for a sample)

“M-m-u-u-r-r-der-r-r-er-r-r!”

David opened his eyes, awakened by the whisper. The room was completely dark, and not even the parking lot lamps’ glow penetrated the murkiness. He noticed the curtains’ unusual thickness when he turned up the heater before retiring, assuming it was the motel’s way of compensating its guests for the sparse insulation. At least one couldn’t be bothered by any car or truck lights coming in late, as most of the motel’s patrons seemed to be in the long-haul transportation business.

The television was blank and silent, and David couldn’t make out its outline. The heater’s comforting hum was also absent. It left the room in a hostile stillness. The sound of a deep sigh filled the air above the space between the two beds. Something floated there.

He raised himself, fully aware of his distinct disadvantage. Peering into the darkness where the sigh came from, he reached for the lamp switch.

“Don’t do it!”

The feminine voice surreal, the accent and the fact it sounded both near and far was familiar.

“Allie Mae?”

The air around him was already chilled from the lack of heat, but it grew colder. The presence was drawing close. A brilliant blue eye appeared, aglow in the darkness less than a foot away. The eye was especially beautiful, and it squinted. Perhaps it scrutinized him, or more likely, its owner was seriously pissed.

“What do you want from me?” David tried to remain calm despite the terror, but found it impossible to control the unsteadiness of his voice.

The eye moved closer, and as it did he became aware of a soft gurgling sound. It reminded him of the tiny streams he used to find in the mountain valleys of Colorado. Cold drafts of air brushed against his face, and the eye came within a few inches of his own eyes, as if the head shrouded by darkness positioned itself to kiss him. The smell of raw meat filled his nostrils. He pushed himself against the bed’s headboard.

“To take back what you’ve stolen,” the voice replied. It was softer and almost normal, erupting from the gurgling noise and sending an icy spray upon him. “And kill the wicked seed once and for all!”

“I didn’t steal your bag of treasures, and I’ll happily give it back!” He clutched the bedspread tightly, and shrunk away from the eye, the smell, and the gurgling. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make things right!”

“It’s too late to give it back,” replied the garbled voice, sending forth another spray of chilled droplets onto his face. David cringed in response and closed his eyes. “It’s too late to give back *my* life, Billy Ray-y-y-y!”

A splash of icy liquid against his throat and t-shirt emphasized the fervency of this last statement. Ever fearful, he opened his eyes. Another eye as grotesque as the first eye was lovely had since joined it. Its mutilated cornea and iris glowed as a ruptured mass of fire and blood within the torn edges of the socket.

“I’m *not* Billy Ray! My name’s *David!”* he shouted.

“Ya are what ya are and always will be, Billy Ray-y-y-y!” the voice hissed. “Y’all and yer seed have killed and taken whatever ya’ve pleased! But, no more!! There ain’t no more hidin’ from yer sins!!!”

“No, you’ve got the wrong guy! I’ve *never* done *anything* to you—”

“M-m-m-u-r-r-r-der-r-r-er-r-r!!”

He threw up his hands up to protect himself as she shrieked her condemnation over and over, the echo resounding loudly throughout the room before returning to where he lay huddled against the headboard. Iciness gripped the base of his bed and steadily moved toward him, chilling the bones in his feet, legs, and thighs as it touched him. Out of the darkness the two eyes suddenly looked up from his waist, revealing the entity now caressed his body like a famished lover, moving from his feet to his genitals and on up to his face. He whimpered in horror as something cold, wet and slimy crept inside his shirt toward his throat.

Screaming in terror, he slapped at himself, falling out of bed. He grabbed the nightstand, pulling the top drawer out while groping for the lamp’s pole. A pair of frigid arms embraced him from behind, and icy hands pinched his nipples. Coldness beyond anything he’d ever known flowed through him from behind, freezing his lungs. He began to pass out. Turning on the light switch was the last thing he remembered.

David woke lying on the floor between the two beds. The nightstand lamp was on, and his head throbbed worse than any migraine he could remember. He groggily stood and

moved to the clock, which faced his bed. It read 3:38 a.m.

After replacing the nightstand's drawer in its slot, and checking to make sure the heater still worked, he set the thermostat and blower on high and went into the bathroom. He intended to splash water in his face and take something for his pounding headache. But, when he looked in the mirror, he could only stare at his reflection.

His face and t-shirt were covered with blood.

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"I hope this was worth it," said Tyreen once we reached the parking lot. The temperature felt as if it had dropped another five degree during our brief visit inside the library. She pulled her hood on and fastened the top buttons around her face above where the front zipper to her parka stopped. She looked like a damned Eskimo—a damned scared Eskimo as she nervously looked around her. "You are ridiculously stubborn…you know? Was this really necessary?"

"You mean getting my Ipad and the book I've been nibbling on for the past week? Hell, yeah!" I retorted, hoping she could see the playful expression on my face.

She already had moved through the parking lot, her pace even quicker than before. I should've known she'd try to hurry back to the dorm once her feet found level pavement, since her tone sounded irritated. Aside from the combination of the wintry chill and my forcing this unwanted excursion upon her, the eerie feeling of being watched had returned, only worse…as if whoever or *whatever* studied us had moved closer. I couldn't detect

anything around us—not even the canine unit patrolling the campus grounds on foot.

“Hey, wait up, Tyreen!” I called after her. “Do you have to be in such a frigging hurry?!”

“*Hell*, yeah!!” she replied, pausing to shoot me a perturbed and worried glance over her shoulder. “The sooner we get back into Massey Hall, the better off we’ll—“

A low menacing growl interrupted her, resounding from across the street, as it emanated toward us from the deeper shadows in front of the Alumni Center. Tyreen froze, as did I.

Shit!

“What the hell was *that??”* Her tone clearly revealed her terror. Several hulking shapes bobbed above the shadow line, moving down the sloping frost-covered lawn toward the street. A shrill shriek echoed eerily in the air from near the Alumni Center’s entrance.

“It doesn’t matter—just *run!!”* I urged her, fearing we only had a sliver of a chance to outrun whatever lurked in the darkness. Yes, we could’ve turned back and headed for whatever protection the library offered. However, assuming the two campus guards were the only ones in the building, we’d soon be in a much worse predicament. At least there were a dozen Knoxville police officers hanging around the lobby at the dorm. With the mental images of what these creatures had wrought upon Peter’s townhouse the other night still fresh in my head, the choice was an easy one.

If only we didn’t have to run past the bastards.

“What the hell are those things??” Tyreen murmured fearfully, *not* moving.

“The last ‘mo-fos’ you’ll ever see if you don’t get your ass in gear!!”

Ignoring the fact that one of the suckers had reached the sidewalk, its yellow eyes glowing like a pair of candles inside a Halloween pumpkin, I grabbed her arm and yanked her behind me, sprinting down the street toward the dorm’s long driveway.

When I heard the scrapes and clicks of sharp talons, claws, or whatever else they dragged across the pavement running alongside, I prepared myself for the worst. Peripherally, I could tell there were seven or eight of these things closing in from the lawn, and another handful had emerged from the dense brush on the other side of the road.

If it had just been me, I might’ve considered giving in and letting them take me, praying my life would end quickly and that I wouldn’t be an ongoing living meal for them. But, Tyreen’s presence and the fact her endangerment was entirely my fault negated that option completely. Somehow, I had to get her to safety.

They say in the direst circumstances people can surprise themselves with superhuman feats. It certainly was the case for me. A powerful surge of adrenalin flowed through me, enabling me to increase my strides while keeping a secure grip on Tyreen. It was like I suddenly floated toward our dorm, and where up until then nary a damned cop was in sight, I felt immense gratitude for the handful mulling around the entrance.

“Hey, help us! HELP!!!” I shrieked, when within fifty feet of the cops.

Unlike the B-horror movies my brothers and me devoted our spare time to watching back in high school, the police didn't act like a bunch of donut-munching buffoons. Once they heard me scream, they quickly mobilized themselves and pointed their pistols and rifles in our direction. Obviously, they saw something following close behind us, coming up fast, like greyhounds chasing a pair of scared rabbits.

"Get over here, *NOW!!!"* one of them shouted, motioning for us to make a beeline to where they huddled in front of the entrance. Three other cops bearing shotguns stepped outside to join them, wearing slack-jawed expressions of stark disbelief.

"Ow-w-w!!" Tyreen cried out as I yanked her arm even harder while sprinting with all my might to the entrance. Suddenly, multiple fire flashes erupted from in front of us, causing both of us to duck instinctively. The volley of gunfire flew above our heads and toward either side.

A bloodcurdling shriek, inhuman in its timbre and hair-raising in its enraged anguish, filled the air just behind us. This time I did cast a glance over my shoulder, horrified by the hideous face just behind us. In the soft glow afforded by the security lights, I saw the orange eyes of the thing gleaming, and its mouth full of razor-sharp, jagged teeth pulled back from deformed lips. They were covered in blood. Tyreen's blood.

It must've happened in the instant I yanked her arm, as the right side of her parka glistened with crimson streaks. Her eyes began to roll up, and I could tell she was about to faint.

"Tyreen!! Hold on!!!"

I sensed the bastard moving up closer to take another bite, only from me this time. There was no way I could fight the monster off if it caught me, and I sure as hell wasn't going to let it get Tyreen, who collapsed on the ground.

This was going to be where it ended. My life and hers, I just knew it. Both of us totally fucked.

A sudden spray of bullets pummeled the creature and two others that appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. More angry shrieks—even worse than the previous one—erupted all around us. I thought for sure we'd all be attacked. The police with raised weapons gazed anxiously into the darkness above them while I hovered over Tyreen's motionless body.

But the menace retreated, at least for the moment.

"Are you all right?" asked the cop closest to me. He didn't wait for a response, perhaps seeing I was unharmed before he even asked, other than a limp from aggravating my ankle again. A hardened veteran roughly my father's age, he glanced at me with steel blue eyes before turning his attention to Tyreen. "Let's get her inside, Jim!" he told another cop who came up to join him. "Bobby, I need for you to call in another patrol for back-up, and tell 'em to have the S.W.A.T. team ready in case we need it!"

"Got it, boss!" said another cop, taller than the rest.

Three more police officers came over to help carefully carry Tyreen into the lobby. I followed close behind them, fearing the worst while praying she'd be all right. I looked

outside to confirm our attackers had truly left, as they had the other night. I didn't see anything, but the darkness beyond the security lights could easily hide any predator. I knew they had to be hiding out there someplace, biding their time before launching another attack. Meanwhile, the cops outside remained huddled together, searching the darkness with the same fearful look I'd seen on Tyreen's face earlier. Like us, they had no idea how to combat effectively these lesser vampires. But they would be schooled soon… sooner than any of them could've ever imagined, I'm sure.

That, however, was the least of my concerns. I was beside myself, thinking Tyreen might die from her injuries. She had lost a lot of blood, which left a dripping crimson trail as they brought her inside. But one of the cops, named Ty Sorwell, had spent time as a paramedic. He assured me that she'd be fine. When I didn't believe him, he showed me the wound to her shoulder, which was the main one. Deep tears in her flesh, but not so deep the bleeding couldn't be stopped. When I worried about how an ambulance could reach the dorm with the menace still out there, he assured me Tyreen wouldn't need one for now, and that we had enough medical supplies to get her through the night.

Obviously, he didn't wish to venture outside any more than I did. But, the low tremors shaking her body told me that she was in shock, something I'm sure Ty knew too.

"We need to get her stable, and then she'll be fine," he said. The youngest male in the group, and by far the best looking, Ty's soft brown eyes reminded me of Peter's. "You might want to take a seat by the TV while we get everything taken care of." He smiled, revealing two perfect rows of veneers.

"Okay," I agreed, and took a step toward the middle of the lobby where the television was. But, then I thought of Johnny and Peter waiting upstairs, and me not being able to call them since I left my cell phone in my room. "Just let me go upstairs, so I can let her boyfriend know what's happened. I'll be right back!"

Before he could stop me, I'd made my way to the elevator. I noticed three guys sitting in front of the TV suddenly look up, as if until that moment they had absolutely no clue what was going on. Luckily, the elevator door opened right away, and I stepped inside.

As I pushed the button for the fourth floor and the door began to close, an immense crash shook the building's main floor. I heard screams and even more gunshots, along with the sound of breaking glass and terrible inhuman screeches from near the main entrance.

Looking back on this, I should've stayed and try to lure the bastards away from Tyreen. But at the time, I thought Johnny and Peter—and whoever else was upstairs—could help us aid the police in fighting these fiends.

Such tragic folly, especially after I learned later that nearly two dozen of the creatures attacked the lobby. We couldn't have saved anyone.

When I reached my floor, the handful of girls who had yet to leave were running around in a panic. Breaking glass and more unearthly shrieks resounded from either side of the hall, and behind the doors leading to the men's side of Massey Hall I heard similar shrieks, and screams from our terrified male counterparts, no less.

"Txema—get back in the elevator!!" Elaine Johnson, our floor's RA shouted at me. "They're attacking everybody! They're—oh my *God!! Oh God, NO-O-O!!!"*

I had stepped out of the elevator, and Elaine stood outside her room, just inside the entrance to our wing. Or, I should say she stood there for a moment following the destruction of her room's picture window. Within seconds of her panicked scream, something flew out into the hallway and grabbed her. My first impression was of a hideously deformed, hairless, white man. Very tall and naked, except for a dark tunic around his waist, with no shoes covering elongated feet with sharp nails curled at the end of each toe.

But, that wasn't what frightened me. The fiend leered at me, with a pair of glowing yellow eyes and a mouthful of jagged sharp teeth, opened wide with dripping saliva. It held Elaine's trembling body fast with one hand while it used the long sharp fingernails on its other hand to tear her throat open. Too late to save her, I could only stare in horror. Tortured by her terrible screams, as the thing's horrible Nosferatu face bore itself into her neck, its pale skin quickly turned crimson from my RA's blood.

It had all become too much for me…the terror and the horror, and I burst into tears. Before I collapsed where I stood, I caught a glimpse of a blurred image racing toward me that followed an explosion of the wooden door to the guys' wing. Then something grabbed me, and I became aware of two small needle-like sensations upon the birthmarks on my neck. For the second time in four days, my body grew weak and the world swam around me. Unable to move, I couldn't respond to anything—not even Peter and Johnny's panicked screams as they ran toward me from further down the hall. For the second time in four days, everything went black.

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About the Author

Aiden James resides in Tennessee with his wife, Fiona, and their two sons, Christopher and Tyler. An avid researcher of all things paranormal, he still spends time visiting haunted locales throughout the Deep South.
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