The Lost Symbol

Dan Brown

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Extract

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Prologue

House of the Temple
8:33 P.M.

The secret *is how to die.*

Since the beginning of time, the secret had always been how to die.

The thirty-four-year-old initiate gazed down at the human skull cradled in his palms. The skull was hollow, like a bowl, filled with bloodred wine.

Drink it, he told himself. *You have nothing to fear.*

As was tradition, he had begun this journey adorned in the ritualistic garb of a medieval heretic being led to the gallows, his loose-fitting shirt gaping open to reveal his pale chest, his left pant leg rolled up to the knee, and his right sleeve rolled up to the elbow. Around his neck hung a heavy rope noose—a "cable-tow" as the brethren called it. Tonight, however, like the brethren bearing witness, he was dressed as a master.

The assembly of brothers encircling him all were adorned in their full regalia of lambskin aprons, sashes, and white gloves. Around their necks hung ceremonial jewels that glistened like ghostly eyes in the muted light. Many of these men held powerful stations in life, and yet the initiate knew their worldly ranks meant nothing within these walls. Here all men were equals, sworn brothers sharing a mystical bond.

As he surveyed the daunting assembly, the initiate wondered who on the outside would ever believe that this collection of men would assemble in one place . . . much less *this* place. The room looked like a holy sanctuary from the ancient world.

The truth, however, was stranger still.

I am just blocks away from the White House.

This colossal edifice, located at 1733 Sixteenth Street NW in Washington, D.C., was a replica of a pre-Christian temple—the temple of King Mausolus, the original *mausoleum* . . . a place to be taken after death. Outside the main entrance, two seventeen-ton sphinxes guarded the bronze

doors. The interior was an ornate labyrinth of ritualistic chambers, halls, sealed vaults, libraries, and even a hollow wall that held the remains of two human bodies. The initiate had been told every room in this building held a secret, and yet he knew no room held deeper secrets than the gigantic chamber in which he was currently kneeling with a skull cradled in his palms.

The Temple Room.

This room was a perfect square. And cavernous. The ceiling soared an astonishing one hundred feet overhead, supported by monolithic columns of green granite. A tiered gallery of dark Russian walnut seats with hand-tooled pigskin encircled the room. A thirty-three-foot-tall throne dominated the western wall, with a concealed pipe organ opposite it. The walls were a kaleidoscope of ancient symbols . . . Egyptian, Hebraic, astronomical, alchemical, and others yet unknown.

Tonight, the Temple Room was lit by a series of precisely arranged candles. Their dim glow was aided only by a pale shaft of moonlight that filtered down through the expansive oculus in the ceiling and illuminated the room's most startling feature—an enormous altar hewn from a solid block of polished Belgian black marble, situated dead center of the square chamber.

The secret is how to die, the initiate reminded himself.

"It is time," a voice whispered.

The initiate let his gaze climb the distinguished white-robed figure standing before him. *The Supreme Worshipful Master.* The man, in his late fifties, was an American icon, well loved, robust, and incalculably wealthy. His once-dark hair was turning silver, and his famous visage reflected a lifetime of power and a vigorous intellect.

"Take the oath," the Worshipful Master said, his voice soft like falling snow. "Complete your journey."

The initiate's journey, like all such journeys, had begun at the first degree. On that night, in a ritual similar to this one, the Worshipful Master had blindfolded him with a velvet hoodwink and pressed a ceremonial dagger to his bare chest, demanding: "Do you seriously declare on your honor, uninfluenced by mercenary or any other unworthy motive, that you freely and voluntarily offer yourself as a candidate for the mysteries and privileges of this brotherhood?"

"I do," the initiate had lied.

"Then let this be a sting to your consciousness," the master had warned him, "as well as instant death should you ever betray the secrets to be imparted to you."

At the time, the initiate had felt no fear. *They will never know my true purpose here.*

Tonight, however, he sensed a foreboding solemnity in the Temple Room, and his mind began replaying all the dire warnings he had been given on his journey, threats of terrible consequences if he ever shared the ancient secrets he was about to learn: *Throat cut from ear to ear . . . tongue torn out by its roots . . . bowels taken out and burned . . . scattered to the four winds of heaven . . . heart plucked out and given to the beasts of the field—*

"Brother," the gray-eyed master said, placing his left hand on the initiate's shoulder. "Take the final oath."

Steeling himself for the last step of his journey, the initiate shifted his muscular frame and turned his attention back to the skull cradled in his palms. The crimson wine looked almost black in the dim candlelight. The chamber had fallen deathly silent, and he could feel all of the witnesses watching him, waiting for him to take his final oath and join their elite ranks.

Tonight, he thought, *something is taking place within these walls that has never before occurred in the history of this brotherhood. Not once, in centuries.*

He knew it would be the spark . . . and it would give him unfathomable power. Energized, he drew a breath and spoke aloud the same words that countless men had spoken before him in countries all over the world.

"May this wine I now drink become a deadly poison to me . . . should I ever knowingly or willfully violate my oath."

His words echoed in the hollow space.

Then all was quiet.

Steadying his hands, the initiate raised the skull to his mouth and felt his lips touch the dry bone. He closed his eyes and tipped the skull toward his mouth, drinking the wine in long, deep swallows. When the last drop was gone, he lowered the skull.

For an instant, he thought he felt his lungs growing tight, and his heart began to pound wildly. *My God, they know!* Then, as quickly as it came, the feeling passed.

A pleasant warmth began to stream through his body. The initiate exhaled, smiling inwardly as he gazed up at the unsuspecting gray-eyed man who had foolishly admitted him into this brotherhood's most secretive ranks.

Soon you will lose everything you hold most dear.

CHAPTER 1

The Otis elevator climbing the south pillar of the Eiffel Tower was overflowing with tourists. Inside the cramped lift, an austere businessman in a pressed suit gazed down at the boy beside him. "You look pale, son. You should have stayed on the ground."

"I'm okay . . ." the boy answered, struggling to control his anxiety. "I'll get out on the next level." *I can't breathe.*

The man leaned closer. "I thought by now you would have gotten over this." He brushed the child's cheek affectionately.

The boy felt ashamed to disappoint his father, but he could barely hear through the ringing in his ears. *I can't breathe. I've got to get out of this box!*

The elevator operator was saying something reassuring about the lift's articulated pistons and puddled-iron construction. Far beneath them, the streets of Paris stretched out in all directions.

Almost there, the boy told himself, craning his neck and looking up at the unloading platform. *Just hold on.*

As the lift angled steeply toward the upper viewing deck, the shaft began to narrow, its massive struts contracting into a tight, vertical tunnel.

"Dad, I don't think—"

Suddenly a staccato crack echoed overhead. The carriage jerked, swaying awkwardly to one side. Frayed cables began whipping around the carriage, thrashing like snakes. The boy reached out for his father.

"Dad!"

Their eyes locked for one terrifying second.

Then the bottom dropped out.

Robert Langdon jolted upright in his soft leather seat, startling out of the semiconscious daydream. He was sitting all alone in the enormous cabin of a Falcon 2000EX corporate jet as it bounced its way through turbulence. In the background, the dual Pratt & Whitney engines hummed evenly.

"Mr. Langdon?" The intercom crackled overhead. "We're on final approach."

Langdon sat up straight and slid his lecture notes back into his leather daybag. He'd been halfway through reviewing Masonic symbology when his mind had drifted. The daydream about his late father, Langdon suspected, had been stirred by this morning's unexpected invitation from Langdon's longtime mentor, Peter Solomon.

The other man I never want to disappoint.

The fifty-eight-year-old philanthropist, historian, and scientist had taken Langdon under his wing nearly thirty years ago, in many ways filling the void left by Langdon's father's death. Despite the man's influential family dynasty and massive wealth, Langdon had found humility and warmth in Solomon's soft gray eyes.

Outside the window the sun had set, but Langdon could still make out the slender silhouette of the world's largest obelisk, rising on the horizon like the spire of an ancient gnomon. The 555-foot marble-faced obelisk marked this nation's heart. All around the spire, the meticulous geometry of streets and monuments radiated outward.

Even from the air, Washington, D.C., exuded an almost mystical power.

Langdon loved this city, and as the jet touched down, he felt a rising excitement about what lay ahead. The jet taxied to a private terminal somewhere in the vast expanse of Dulles International Airport and came to a stop.

Langdon gathered his things, thanked the pilots, and stepped out of the jet's luxurious interior onto the foldout staircase. The cold January air felt liberating.

Breathe, Robert, he thought, appreciating the wide-open spaces.

A blanket of white fog crept across the runway, and Langdon had the sensation he was stepping into a marsh as he descended onto the misty tarmac.

"Hello! Hello!" a singsong British voice shouted from across the tarmac. "Professor Langdon?"

Langdon looked up to see a middle-aged woman with a badge and clipboard hurrying toward him, waving happily as he approached. Curly blond hair protruded from under a stylish knit wool hat.

"Welcome to Washington, sir!"

Langdon smiled. "Thank you."

"My name is Pam, from passenger services." The woman spoke with an exuberance that was almost unsettling. "If you'll come with me, sir, your car is waiting."

Langdon followed her across the runway toward the Signature terminal, which was surrounded by glistening private jets. *A taxi stand for the rich and famous.*

"I hate to embarrass you, Professor," the woman said, sounding sheepish, "but you *are* the Robert Langdon who writes books about symbols and religion, aren't you?"

Langdon hesitated and then nodded.

"I thought so!" she said, beaming. "My book group read your book about the sacred feminine and the church! What a delicious scandal that one caused! You do enjoy putting the fox in the henhouse!"

Langdon smiled. "Scandal wasn't really my intention."

The woman seemed to sense Langdon was not in the mood to discuss his work. "I'm sorry. Listen to me rattling on. I know you probably get tired of being recognized . . . but it's your own fault." She playfully motioned to his clothing. "Your uniform gave you away."

My uniform? Langdon glanced down at his attire. He was wearing his usual charcoal turtleneck, Harris Tweed jacket, khakis, and collegiate cordovan loafers . . . his standard attire for the classroom, lecture circuit, author photos, and social events.

The woman laughed. "Those turtlenecks you wear are so dated. You'd look much sharper in a tie!"

No chance, Langdon thought. *Little nooses.*

Neckties had been required six days a week when Langdon attended Phillips Exeter Academy, and despite the headmaster's romantic claims that the origin of the cravat went back to the silk *fascalia* worn by Roman orators to warm their vocal cords, Langdon knew that, etymologically, *cravat* actually derived from a ruthless band of "Croat" mercenaries who donned knotted neckerchiefs before they stormed into battle. To this day, this ancient battle garb was donned by modern office warriors hoping to intimidate their enemies in daily boardroom battles.

"Thanks for the advice," Langdon said with a chuckle. "I'll consider a tie in the future."

Mercifully, a professional-looking man in a dark suit got out of a sleek Lincoln Town Car parked near the terminal and held up his finger. "Mr. Langdon? I'm Charles with Beltway Limousine." He opened the passenger door. "Good evening, sir. Welcome to Washington."

Langdon tipped Pam for her hospitality and then climbed into the plush interior of the Town Car. The driver showed him the temperature controls, the bottled water, and the basket of hot muffins. Seconds later, Langdon was speeding away on a private access road. *So this is how the other half lives.*

As the driver gunned the car up Windsock Drive, he consulted his passenger manifest and placed a quick call. "This is Beltway Limousine," the

driver said with professional efficiency. "I was asked to confirm once my passenger had landed." He paused. "Yes, sir. Your guest, Mr. Langdon, has arrived, and I will deliver him to the Capitol Building by seven P.M. You're welcome, sir." He hung up.

Langdon had to smile. *No stone left unturned*. Peter Solomon's attention to detail was one of his most potent assets, allowing him to manage his substantial power with apparent ease. *A few billion dollars in the bank doesn't hurt either.*

Langdon settled into the plush leather seat and closed his eyes as the noise of the airport faded behind him. The U.S. Capitol was a half hour away, and he appreciated the time alone to gather his thoughts. Everything had happened so quickly today that Langdon only now had begun to think in earnest about the incredible evening that lay ahead.

Arriving under a veil of secrecy, Langdon thought, amused by the prospect.

Ten miles from the Capitol Building, a lone figure was eagerly preparing for Robert Langdon's arrival.

CHAPTER 2

The one who called himself Mal'akh pressed the tip of the needle against his shaved head, sighing with pleasure as the sharp tool plunged in and out of his flesh. The soft hum of the electric device was addictive . . . as was the bite of the needle sliding deep into his dermis and depositing its dye.

I am a masterpiece.

The goal of tattooing was never beauty. The goal was *change*. From the scarified Nubian priests of 2000 B.C., to the tattooed acolytes of the Cybele cult of ancient Rome, to the *moko* scars of the modern Maori, humans have tattooed themselves as a way of offering up their bodies in partial sacrifice, enduring the physical pain of embellishment and emerging changed beings.

Despite the ominous admonitions of Leviticus 19:28, which forbade the marking of one's flesh, tattoos had become a rite of passage shared by millions of people in the modern age—everyone from clean-cut teenagers to hard-core drug users to suburban housewives.

The act of tattooing one's skin was a transformative declaration of power, an announcement to the world: *I am in control of my own flesh*. The intoxicating feeling of control derived from physical transformation had addicted millions to flesh-altering practices . . . cosmetic surgery, body piercing, bodybuilding, and steroids . . . even bulimia and transgendering. *The human spirit craves mastery over its carnal shell.*

A single bell chimed on Mal'akh's grandfather clock, and he looked up. Six thirty P.M. Leaving his tools, he wrapped the Kiryu silk robe around his naked, six-foot-three body and strode down the hall. The air inside this sprawling mansion was heavy with the pungent fragrance of his skin dyes and smoke from the beeswax candles he used to sterilize his needles. The towering young man moved down the corridor past priceless Italian antiques—a Piranesi etching, a Savonarola chair, a silver Bugarini oil lamp.

He glanced through a floor-to-ceiling window as he passed, admiring

the classical skyline in the distance. The luminous dome of the U.S. Capitol glowed with solemn power against the dark winter sky.

This is where it is hidden, he thought. *It is buried out there somewhere.*

Few men knew it existed . . . and even fewer knew its awesome power or the ingenious way in which it had been hidden. To this day, it remained this country's greatest untold secret. Those few who *did* know the truth kept it hidden behind a veil of symbols, legends, and allegory.

Now they have opened their doors to me, Mal'akh thought.

Three weeks ago, in a dark ritual witnessed by America's most influential men, Mal'akh had ascended to the thirty-third degree, the highest echelon of the world's oldest surviving brotherhood. Despite Mal'akh's new rank, the brethren had told him nothing. *Nor will they,* he knew. That was not how it worked. There were circles within circles . . . brotherhoods within brotherhoods. Even if Mal'akh waited years, he might never earn their ultimate trust.

Fortunately, he did not need their trust to obtain their deepest secret.

My initiation served its purpose.

Now, energized by what lay ahead, he strode toward his bedroom. Throughout his entire home, audio speakers broadcast the eerie strains of a rare recording of a castrato singing the "Lux Aeterna" from the Verdi Requiem—a reminder of a previous life. Mal'akh touched a remote control to bring on the thundering "Dies Irae." Then, against a backdrop of crashing timpani and parallel fifths, he bounded up the marble staircase, his robe billowing as he ascended on sinewy legs.

As he ran, his empty stomach growled in protest. For two days now, Mal'akh had fasted, consuming only water, preparing his body in accordance with the ancient ways. *Your hunger will be satisfied by dawn*, he reminded himself. *Along with your pain*.

Mal'akh entered his bedroom sanctuary with reverence, locking the door behind him. As he moved toward his dressing area, he paused, feeling himself drawn to the enormous gilded mirror. Unable to resist, he turned and faced his own reflection. Slowly, as if unwrapping a priceless gift, Mal'akh opened his robe to unveil his naked form. The vision awed him.

I am a masterpiece.

His massive body was shaved and smooth. He lowered his gaze first to his feet, which were tattooed with the scales and talons of a hawk. Above that, his muscular legs were tattooed as carved pillars—his left leg spiraled and his right vertically striated. *Boaz and Jachin*. His groin and abdomen formed a decorated archway, above which his powerful chest was emblazoned with the double-headed phoenix . . . each head in profile with its

visible eye formed by one of Mal'akh's nipples. His shoulders, neck, face, and shaved head were completely covered with an intricate tapestry of ancient symbols and sigils.

I am an artifact . . . an evolving icon.

One mortal man had seen Mal'akh naked, eighteen hours earlier. The man had shouted in fear. "Good God, you're a demon!"

"If you perceive me as such," Mal'akh had replied, understanding as had the ancients that angels and demons were identical—interchangeable archetypes—all a matter of polarity: the guardian angel who conquered your enemy in battle was perceived by your enemy as a demon destroyer.

Mal'akh tipped his face down now and got an oblique view of the top of his head. There, within the crownlike halo, shone a small circle of pale, untattooed flesh. This carefully guarded canvas was Mal'akh's only remaining piece of virgin skin. The sacred space had waited patiently . . . and tonight, it would be filled. Although Mal'akh did not yet possess what he required to complete his masterpiece, he knew the moment was fast approaching.

Exhilarated by his reflection, he could already feel his power growing. He closed his robe and walked to the window, again gazing out at the mystical city before him. *It is buried out there somewhere.*

Refocusing on the task at hand, Mal'akh went to his dressing table and carefully applied a base of concealer makeup to his face, scalp, and neck until his tattoos had disappeared. Then he donned the special set of clothing and other items he had meticulously prepared for this evening. When he finished, he checked himself in the mirror. Satisfied, he ran a soft palm across his smooth scalp and smiled.

It is out there, he thought. *And tonight, one man will help me find it.*

As Mal'akh exited his home, he prepared himself for the event that would soon shake the U.S. Capitol Building. He had gone to enormous lengths to arrange all the pieces for tonight.

And now, at last, his final pawn had entered the game.