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Opening Extract from...

Angelology

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Devil's Throat Cavern, Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria

Winter 1943

The angelologists examined the body. It was intact, without decay, the skin as smooth and as white as parchment. The lifeless aquamarine eyes gazed heavenward. Pale curls fell against a high forehead and sculptural shoulders, forming a halo of golden hair. Even the robes—the cloth woven of a white shimmering metallic material that none of them could identify exactly—remained pristine, as if the creature had died in a hospital room in Paris and not a cavern deep below the earth.

It should not have surprised them to find the angel in that preserved condition. The fingernails, nacreous as the inside of an oyster shell; the long smooth navel-less stomach; the eerie translucency of the skin—everything about the creature was as they knew it would be, even the positioning of the wings was correct. And yet it was too lovely, too vital for something they had studied only in airless libraries, prints of quattrocento paintings spread before them like road maps. All their professional lives they had waited to see it. Although not one of them would have admitted so, they secretly suspected to find a monstrous corpse, all bones and fiber shreds, like something unearthed from an archaeological dig. Instead there was this: a delicate tapering hand, an aquiline nose, pink lips pressed in a frozen kiss. The angelologists hovered above the body, gazing down in anticipation, as if they expected the creature to blink its eyes and wake.

THE FIRST SPHERE



To you this tale refers,
Who seek to lead your mind
Into the upper day,
For he who overcomes should
Turn back his gaze
Toward the Tartarean cave,
Whatever excellence he takes with him
He loses when he looks below.

—Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

St. Rose Convent, Hudson River Valley, Milton, New York

December 23, 1999, 4:45 A.M.

Evangeline woke before the sun came up, when the fourth floor was silent and dark. Quiet, so as not to wake the sisters who had prayed through the night, she gathered her shoes, stockings, and skirt in her arms and walked barefoot to the communal lavatory. She dressed quickly, half asleep, without looking in the mirror. From a sliver of bathroom window, she surveyed the convent grounds, covered in a predawn haze. A vast snowy courtyard stretched to the water's edge, where a scrim of barren trees limned the Hudson. St. Rose Convent perched precariously close to the river, so close that in daylight there seemed to be two convents—one on land and one wavering lightly upon the water, the first folding out into the next, an illusion broken in summer by barges and in winter by teeth of ice. Evangeline watched the river flow by, a wide strip of black against the pure white snow. Soon morning would gild the water with sunlight.

Bending before the porcelain sink, Evangeline splashed cold water over her face, dispelling the remnants of a dream. She could not recall the dream, only the impression it made upon her—a wash of foreboding that left a pall over her thoughts, a sensation of loneliness and confusion she could not explain. Half asleep, she peeled away her heavy flannel night shift and, feeling the chill of the bathroom, shivered. Standing in her white cotton briefs and cotton undershirt (standard garments ordered in bulk and distributed biyearly to all the sisters at St. Rose), she looked at herself with an appraising, analytic eye—the thin arms and legs, the flat stomach, the tousled brown hair, the golden pendant resting upon her breastbone. The reflection floating on the glass before her was that of a sleepy young woman.

Evangeline shivered again from the cool air and turned to her clothing. She owned five identical knee-length black skirts, seven black turtlenecks for the winter months, seven black short-sleeved cotton button-up shirts for the summer, one black wool sweater, fifteen pairs of white cotton underwear, and innumerable black nylon stockings: nothing more and nothing less than what was necessary. She pulled on a turtleneck and fitted a bandeau over

her hair, pressing it firmly against her forehead before clipping on a black veil. She stepped into a pair of nylons and a wool skirt, buttoning, zipping, and straightening the wrinkles in one quick, unconscious gesture. In a matter of seconds, her private self disappeared and she became Sister Evangeline, Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. With her rosary in hand, the metamorphosis was complete. She placed her nightgown in the bin at the far end of the lavatory and prepared to face the day.

Sister Evangeline had observed the 5:00 A.M. prayer hour each morning for the past half decade, since completing her formation and taking vows at eighteen years of age. She had lived at St. Rose Convent since her twelfth year, however, and knew the convent as intimately as one knows the temperament of a beloved friend. She had her morning route through the compound down to a science. As she rounded each floor, her fingers traced the wooden balustrades, her shoes skimming the landings. The convent was always empty at that hour, blue-shadowed and sepulchral, but after sunrise St. Rose would swarm with life, a beehive of work and devotion, each room glistening with sacred activity and prayer. The silence would soon abate—the staircases, the community rooms, the library, the communal cafeteria, and the dozens of closet-size bedchambers would soon be alive with sisters.

Down three flights of stairs she ran. She could get to the chapel with her eyes closed.

Reaching the first floor, Sister Evangeline walked into the imposing central hallway, the spine of St. Rose Convent. Along the walls hung framed portraits of long-dead abbesses, distinguished sisters, and the various incarnations of the convent building itself. Hundreds of women stared from the frames, reminding every sister who passed by on her way to prayer that she was part of an ancient and noble matriarchy where all women—both the living and the dead—were woven together in a single common mission.

Although she knew she risked being late, Sister Evangeline paused at the center of the hallway. Here, the image of Rose of Viterbo, the saint after whom the convent had been named, hung in a gilt frame, her tiny hands folded in prayer, an evanescent nimbus of light glowing about her head. St. Rose's life had been short. Just after her third birthday, angels began to whisper to her, urging her to speak their message to all who would listen. Rose complied, earning her sainthood as a young woman, when, after preaching the goodness of God and His angels to a heathen village, she was

condemned to die a witch. The townspeople bound her to a stake and lit a fire. To the great consternation of the crowd, Rose did not burn but stood in skeins of flame for three hours, conversing with angels as the fire licked her body. Some believed that angels wrapped themselves about the girl, covering her in a clear, protective armor. Eventually she died in the flames, but the miraculous intervention left her body inviolable. St. Rose's incorrupt corpse was paraded through the streets of Viterbo hundreds of years after her death, not the slightest mark of her ordeal evident upon the adolescent body.

Remembering the hour, Sister Evangeline turned from the portrait. She walked to the end of the hallway, where a great wooden portal carved with scenes of the Annunciation separated the convent from the church. On one side of the boundary, Sister Evangeline stood in the simplicity of the convent; on the other rose the majestic church. She heard the sound of her footsteps sharpen as she left carpeting for a pale roseate marble veined with green. The movement across the threshold took just one step, but the difference was immense. The air grew heavy with incense; the light saturated blue from the stained glass. White plaster walls gave way to great sheets of stone. The ceiling soared. The eye adjusted to the golden abundance of Neo-Rococo. As she left the convent, Evangeline's earthly commitments of community and charity fell away and she entered the sphere of the divine: God, Mary, and the angels.

In the beginning years of her time at St. Rose, the number of angelic images in Maria Angelorum Church struck Evangeline as excessive. As a girl she'd found them overwhelming, too ever-present and overwrought. The creatures filled every crook and crevice of the church, leaving little room for much else. Seraphim ringed the central dome; marble archangels held the corners of the altar. The columns were inlaid with golden halos, trumpets, harps, and tiny wings; carved visages of putti stared from the pew ends, hypnotizing and compact as fruit bats. Although she understood that the opulence was meant as an offering to the Lord, a symbol of their devotion, Evangeline secretly preferred the plain functionality of the convent. During her formation she felt critical of the founding sisters, wondering why they had not used such wealth for better purposes. But, like so much else, her objections and preferences had shifted after she took the habit, as if the clothing ceremony itself caused her to melt ever so slightly and take a new, more uniform shape. After five years as a professed sister, the girl she had been had nearly faded away.

Pausing to dip her index finger into a fount of holy water, Sister Evangeline blessed herself (forehead, heart, left shoulder, right shoulder) and stepped through the narrow Romanesque basilica, past the fourteen Stations of the Cross, the straight-backed red oak pews, and the marble columns. As the light was dim at that hour, Evangeline followed the wide central aisle through the nave to the sacristy, where chalices and bells and vestments were locked in cupboards, awaiting Mass. At the far end of the sacristy, she came to a door. Taking a deep breath, Evangeline closed her eyes, as if preparing them for a greater brightness. She placed her hand on the cold brass knob and, heart pounding, pushed.

The Adoration Chapel opened around her, bursting upon her vision. Its walls glittered golden, as if she had stepped into the center of an enameled Fabergé egg. The private chapel of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration had a high central dome and huge stained-glass panels that filled each wall. The central masterpiece of the Adoration Chapel was a set of Bavarian windows hung high above the altar depicting the three angelic spheres: the First Sphere of Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; the Second Sphere of Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; and the Third Sphere of Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Together the spheres formed the heavenly choir, the collective voice of heaven. Each morning Sister Evangeline would stare at the angels floating in an expanse of glittering glass and try to imagine their native brilliance, the pure radiant light that rose from them like heat.

Sister Evangeline spied Sisters Bernice and Boniface—scheduled for adoration each morning from four to five—kneeling before the altar. Together the sisters ran their fingers over the carved wooden beads of their seven-decade rosaries, as if intent to whisper the very last syllable of prayer with as much mindfulness as they had whispered the first. One could find two sisters in full habit kneeling side by side in the chapel at all times of the day and night, their lips moving in synchronized patterns of prayer, conjoined in purpose before the white marble altar. The object of the sisters' adoration was encased in a golden starburst monstrance placed high upon the altar, a white host suspended in an explosion of gold.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration had prayed every minute of every hour of every day since Mother Francesca, their founding abbess, had initiated adoration in the early nineteenth century. Nearly two hundred years later, the prayer persisted, forming the longest, most persistent chain

of perpetual prayer in the world. For the sisters, time passed with the bending of knees and the soft clicking of rosary beads and the daily journey from the convent to the Adoration Chapel. Hour after hour they arrived at the chapel, crossed themselves, and knelt in humility before the Lord. They prayed by morning light; they prayed by candlelight. They prayed for peace and grace and the end of human suffering. They prayed for Africa and Asia and Europe and the Americas. They prayed for the dead and for the living. They prayed for their fallen, fallen world.

Blessing themselves in tandem, Sisters Bernice and Boniface left the chapel. The black skirts of their habits—long, heavy garments of more traditional cut than Sister Evangeline's post–Vatican II attire—dragged along the polished marble floor as they made way for the next set of sisters to take their place.

Sister Evangeline sank into the foam cushion of a kneeler, the cover of which was still warm from Sister Bernice. Ten seconds later Sister Philomena, her daily prayer partner, joined her. Together they continued a prayer that had begun generations before, a prayer that ran through each sister of their order like a chain of perpetual hope. A golden pendulum clock, small and intricate, its cogs and wheels clicking with soft regularity under a protective glass dome, chimed five times. Relief flooded Evangeline's mind: Everything in heaven and earth was perfectly on schedule. She bowed her head and began to pray. It was exactly five o'clock.

In recent years Evangeline had been assigned to work in the St. Rose library as assistant to her prayer partner, Sister Philomena. It was an unglamorous position to be sure, not at all as high-profile as working in the Mission Office or assisting in Recruitment, and it had none of the rewards of charity work. As if to emphasize the lowly nature of the position, Evangeline's office was located in the most decrepit part of the convent, a drafty section of the first floor down the hall from the library itself, with leaky pipes and Civil War–era windows, a combination that led to dampness, mold, and an abundance of head colds each winter. In fact, Evangeline had been afflicted with a number of respiratory infections in the past months, causing her a shortness of breath that she blamed entirely on drafts.

The saving grace of Evangeline's office was the view. Her worktable abutted a window on the northeast side of the grounds, overlooking the Hudson

River. In the summer her window would perspire, giving the impression that the exterior world was steamy as a rain forest; in the winter the window would frost, and she would half expect a rookery of penguins to waddle into sight. She would chip the thin ice with a letter opener and gaze out as freight trains rolled alongside the river and barges floated upon it. From her desk she could see the thick stone wall that wrapped about the grounds, an impregnable border between the sisters and the outside world. While the wall was a remnant from the nineteenth century, when the nuns kept themselves physically apart from the secular community, it remained a substantial edifice in the FSPA imagination. Five feet high and two feet wide, it formed a stalwart impediment between worlds pure and profane.

Each morning after her five o'clock prayer hour, breakfast, and morning Mass, Evangeline stationed herself at the rickety table under the window of her office. She called the table her desk, although there were no drawers to its credit and nothing approximating the mahogany sheen of the secretary in Sister Philomena's office. Still, it was wide and tidy, with all the usual supplies. Each day she straightened her calendar blotter, arranged her pencils, tucked her hair neatly behind her veil, and got to work.

Perhaps because the majority of the St. Rose mail came in regard to their collection of angelic images—the main index of which was located in the library—all convent correspondence ended up in Evangeline's care. Evangeline collected the mail each morning from the Mission Office on the first floor, filling a black cotton bag with letters and returning to her desk to sort them. It became her duty to file the letters in an orderly system (first by date, then alphabetically by surname) and respond to inquiries on their official St. Rose stationery, a chore she completed at the electric typewriter in Sister Philomena's office, a much warmer space that opened directly upon the library.

The job proved quiet, categorical, and regular, qualities that suited Evangeline. At twenty-three, she was content to believe that her appearance and character were fixed—she had large green eyes, dark hair, pale skin, and a contemplative demeanor. After professing her final vows, she had chosen to dress in plain dark clothing, a uniform she would keep the rest of her life. She wore no adornments at all except for a gold pendant, a tiny lyre that had belonged to her mother. Although the pendant was beautiful, the antique lyre finely wrought gold, for Evangeline its value remained purely

emotional. She had inherited it upon her mother's death. Her grandmother, Gabriella Lévi-Franche Valko, had brought the necklace to Evangeline at the funeral. Taking Evangeline to a bénitier, Gabriella had cleaned the pendant with holy water, fastened the necklace around Evangeline's throat. Evangeline saw that an identical lyre glimmered at Gabriella's neck. "Promise me you will wear it at all times, day and night, just as Angela wore it," Gabriella had said. Her grandmother pronounced Evangeline's mother's name with a lilting accent, swallowing the first syllable and emphasizing the second: An-*gel*-a. She preferred her grandmother's pronunciation to all others and, as a girl, had learned to imitate it perfectly. Like Evangeline's parents, Gabriella had become little more than a powerful memory. The pendant, however, felt substantial against her skin, a solid connection to her mother and grandmother.

Evangeline sighed and arranged the day's mail before her. The time had arrived to get down to work. Choosing a letter, she sliced the envelope with the silver blade of her letter opener, tapped the folded paper onto the table, and read it. She knew instantly that this was not the sort of letter she usually opened. It did not begin, as most of the regular convent correspondences did, by complimenting the sisters on their two hundred years of perpetual adoration, or their numerous works of charity, or their dedication to the spirit of world peace. Nor did the letter include a charitable donation or the promise of remembrance in a will. The letter began abruptly with a request:

Dear St. Rose Convent Representative,

In the process of conducting research for a private client, it has come to my attention that Mrs. Abigail Aldrich Rockefeller, matriarch of the Rockefeller family and patron of the arts, may have briefly corresponded with the abbess of St. Rose Convent, Mother Innocenta, in the years 1943–1944, four years before Mrs. Rockefeller's death. I have recently come upon a series of letters from Mother Innocenta that suggests a relationship between the two women. As I can find no references to the acquaintance in any scholarly work about the Rockefeller family, I am writing to inquire if Mother Innocenta's papers were archived. If so, I would

like to request that I might be allowed to visit St. Rose Convent to view them. I can assure you that I will be considerate of your time and that my client is willing to cover all expenses. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this matter.

Yours,
V. A. Verlaine

Evangeline read the letter twice and, instead of filing it away in the usual manner, walked directly to Sister Philomena's office, took a leaf of stationery from a stack upon her desk, rolled it onto the barrel of the typewriter, and, with more than the usual vigor, typed:

Dear Mr. Verlaine,

While St. Rose Convent has great respect for historical research endeavors, it is our present policy to refuse access to our archives or our collection of angelic images for private research or publication purposes. Please accept our most sincere apologies.

Many Blessings,
Evangeline Angelina Cacciatore,
FSPA

Evangeline signed her name across the bottom of the missive, stamped the letter with the official FSPA seal, and folded it into an envelope. After typing out the New York City address on an envelope, she affixed a stamp and placed the letter on a stack of outgoing mail balanced at the edge of a polished table, waiting for Evangeline to take it to the post office in New Paltz.

The response might be perceived by some as severe, but Sister Philomena had specifically instructed Evangeline to deny all access to the archives to amateur researchers, the number of which seemed to be growing in recent years with the New Age craze for guardian angels and the like. In fact, Evangeline had denied access to a tour bus of women and men from such a group only six months before. She didn't like to discriminate against visitors, but there was a certain pride the sisters took in their angels, and they did not appreciate the light cast upon their serious mission by amateurs with crystals and tarot decks.

Evangeline looked at the stack of letters with satisfaction. She would post them that very afternoon.

Suddenly something struck her as odd about Mr. Verlaine's request. She pulled the letter from the pocket of her skirt and reread the line stating that Mrs. Rockefeller may have briefly corresponded with the abbess of St. Rose Convent, Mother Innocenta, in the years 1943–1944.

The dates startled Evangeline. Something momentous had occurred at St. Rose in 1944, something so important to FSPA lore that it would have proved impossible to overlook its significance. Evangeline walked through the library, past polished oak tables adorned with small reading lamps to a black metal fireproof door at the far end of the room. Taking a set of keys from her pocket, she unlocked the archives. Was it possible, she wondered as she pushed the door open, that the events of 1944 were in some way related to Mr. Verlaine's request?

Considering the amount of information the archives contained, they were given a miserly allotment of space in the library. Metal shelves lined the narrow room, storage boxes arranged neatly upon them. The system was simple and organized: Newspaper clippings were filed in the boxes on the left side of the room; convent correspondence and personal items such as letters, journals, and artwork of the dead sisters to the right. Each box had been labeled with a year and placed chronologically on a shelf. The founding year of St. Rose Convent, 1809, began the procession, and the present year of 1999 ended it.

Evangeline knew the composition of the newspaper articles well, as Sister Philomena had assigned her the laborious task of encapsulating the delicate newsprint in clear acetate. After so many hours of trimming and taping and filing the clippings in acid-free cardboard boxes, she felt considerable chagrin at her inability to locate them immediately.

Evangeline recalled with precise and vivid detail the event that had occurred at the beginning of 1944: In the winter months, a fire had destroyed much of the upper floors of the convent. Evangeline had encapsulated a yellowed photograph of the convent, its roof eaten away by flames, the snowy courtyard filled with old-fashioned Seagrave fire engines as hundreds of nuns in serge habits—attire not altogether different from that still worn by Sisters Bernice and Boniface—stood watching their home burn.

Evangeline had heard stories of the fire from the Elder Sisters. On that cold February day, hundreds of shivering nuns stood on the snow-covered

grounds watching the convent melt away. A group of foolhardy sisters went back inside the convent, climbing the east-wing staircase—the only passageway still free of fire—and threw iron bed frames and desks and as many linens as possible from the fourth-floor windows, trying, no doubt, to salvage their more precious possessions. The sisters' collection of fountain pens, secured in a metal box, was thrown to the courtyard. It cracked upon hitting the frozen ground, sending inkwells flying like grenades. They had shattered upon impact, exploding in great bursts of colored splotches on the grounds, red, black, and blue bruises bleeding into the snow. Soon the courtyard was piled high with debris of twisted bed springs, water-soaked mattresses, broken desks, and smoke-damaged books.

Within minutes of detection, the fire spread through the main wing of the convent, swept through the sewing room, devouring bolts of black muslin and white cotton, then moved on to the embroidery room, where it incinerated the folds of needlework and English lace the sisters had been saving to sell at the Easter Bazaar, and then finally arrived at the art closets filled with rainbows of tissue paper twisted into jonquils, daffodils, and hundreds of multicolored roses. The laundry room, an immense sweatshop inhabited by industrial-size wringers and coal-heated hot irons, was completely engulfed. Jars of bleach exploded, fueling the fire and sending toxic smoke throughout the lower floors. Fifty fresh-laundered serge habits disappeared in an instant of heat. By the time the blaze had burned down to a slow, steamy stream of smoke by late afternoon, St. Rose was a mass of charred wood and sizzling roof tin.

At last Evangeline came upon three boxes marked 1944. Realizing that news of the fire would have spilled over into the middle months of 1944, Evangeline pulled down all three, stacked them together, and carried them out of the archives, bumping the door closed with her hip. She strode back to her cold, dreary office to examine the contents of the boxes.

According to a detailed article clipped from a Poughkeepsie newspaper, the fire had started from an undetermined quadrant of the convent's fourth floor and spread through the entire building. A grainy black-and-white photograph showed the carcass of the convent, beams burned to charcoal. A caption read, *"Milton Convent Ravaged by Morning Blaze."* Reading through the article, Evangeline found that six women, including Mother Innocenta, the abbess who may or may not have been in correspondence with Mrs. Abigail Rockefeller, had died of asphyxiation.

Evangeline took a deep breath, chilled by the image of her beloved home engulfed in flames. She opened another box and paged through a sheaf of encapsulated newspaper clippings. By February 15 the sisters had moved into the basement of the convent, sleeping on cots, bathing and cooking in the kitchen so that they could assist in repairing the living quarters. They continued their regular routine of prayer in the Adoration Chapel, which had been left untouched by the fire, performing their hourly adoration as if nothing had happened. Scanning the article, Evangeline stopped abruptly at a line toward the bottom of the page. To her amazement she read:

> Despite the near-total destruction of the convent proper, it is reported that a generous donation from the Rockefeller family will allow the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration to repair St. Rose Convent and their Mary of the Angels Church to their original condition.

Evangeline put the articles into their boxes, stacked them one on top of the other, and returned them to their home in the archive. Edging to the back of the room, she found a box marked EPHEMERA 1940–1945. If Mother Innocenta had had contact with anyone as illustrious as Abigail Rockefeller, the letters would have been filed among such papers. Evangeline set the box on the cool linoleum floor and squatted before it. She found all variety of records from the convent—receipts for cloth and soap and candles, a program of the 1941 St. Rose Christmas celebrations, and a number of letters between Mother Innocenta and the head of the diocese regarding the arrival of novices. To her frustration, there was nothing more to be found.

It was possible, Evangeline reasoned as she returned the documents to their correct box, that Innocenta's personal papers had been filed elsewhere. There were any number of boxes in which she might find them—Mission Correspondence or Foreign Charities seemed especially promising. She was about to move on to another box when she spied a pale envelope tucked below a pack of receipts for church supplies. Pulling it out, she saw that it was addressed to Mother Innocenta. The return address had been written in elegant calligraphy: *"Mrs. A. Rockefeller, 10 W. 54th Street, New York, New York."* Evangeline felt the blood rush to her head. Here was proof that Mr. Verlaine had been correct: A connection between Mother Innocenta and Abigail Rockefeller did, in fact, exist.

Evangeline looked carefully at the envelope and then tapped it. A thin paper fell into her hands.

December 14, 1943

Dearest Mother Innocenta,

I send good news of our interests in the Rhodope Mountains, where our efforts are by all accounts a success. Your guidance has helped the progress of the expedition enormously, and I daresay my own contributions have been useful as well. Celestine Clochette will be arriving in New York early February. More news will reach you soon. Until then, I am sincerely yours,

A. A. Rockefeller

Evangeline stared at the paper in her hands. It was beyond her understanding. Why would someone like Abigail Rockefeller write to Mother Innocenta? What did "our interests in the Rhodope Mountains" mean? And why had the Rockefeller family paid for the restoration of St. Rose after the fire? It made no sense at all. The Rockefellers, as far as Evangeline knew, were not Catholic and had no connection to the diocese. Unlike other wealthy Gilded Age families—the Vanderbilts came immediately to mind—they did not own a significant amount of property in the vicinity. Yet there had to be some explanation for such a generous gift.

Evangeline folded Mrs. Rockefeller's letter and put it into her pocket. Walking from the archives into the library, she felt the difference in temperature in an instant—the fire had overheated the room. She removed the letter she had written to Mr. Verlaine from the stack of mail waiting to be posted and carried it to the fireplace. As the flame caught the edge of the envelope, painting a fine black track into the pink cotton bond, an image of the martyred Rose of Viterbo appeared in Evangeline's mind—a flitting figment of a willowy girl withstanding a raging fire—and disappeared as if carried away in a swirl of smoke.

The A train, Eighth Avenue Express, Columbus Circle station, New York City

The automatic doors slid open, ushering a gust of freezing air through the train. Verlaine zipped his overcoat and stepped onto the platform, where he was met by a blast of Christmas music, a reggae version of "Jingle Bells" performed by two men with dreadlocks. The groove mixed with the heat and motion of hundreds of bodies along the narrow platform. Following the crowd up a set of wide, dirty steps, Verlaine climbed to the snow-blanketed world aboveground, his gold-wire-rimmed eyeglasses fogging opaque in the cold. Into the arms of an ice-laden winter afternoon he rose, a half-blind man feeling his way through the churning chill of the city.

Once his glasses cleared, Verlaine saw the holiday shopping season in full swing—mistletoe hung at the subway entrance, and a less-than-jolly Salvation Army Santa Claus shook a brass bell, a red-enameled donation bucket at his side. Christmas lights scored the streetlamps red and green. As masses of New Yorkers hurried past, scarves and heavy overcoats warming them against the icy wind, Verlaine checked the date on his watch. He saw, to his great surprise, that there were only two days until Christmas.

Each year hordes of tourists descended upon the city at Christmas, and each year Verlaine vowed to stay away from midtown for the entire month of December, hiding out in the cushioned quiet of his Greenwich Village studio. Somehow he had coasted through years of Manhattan Christmases without actually participating in them. His parents, who lived in the Midwest, sent a package of gifts each year, which he usually opened as he spoke with his mother on the phone, but that was as far as his Christmas cheer went. On Christmas Day he would go out for drinks with friends and then, sufficiently tipsy on martinis, catch an action movie. It had become a tradition, one he looked forward to, especially this year. He'd worked so much in the past months that he welcomed the thought of a break.

Verlaine jostled through the crowd, slush clinging to his scuffed vintage

wing tips as he progressed along the salt-strewn walkway. Why his client had insisted upon meeting in Central Park and not in a warm, quiet restaurant remained beyond his imagination. If it weren't such an important project—indeed, if it were not his only source of income at the moment—he would have insisted upon mailing in his work and being done with it. But the dossier of research had taken months to prepare, and it was imperative that he explain his findings in just the right manner. Besides, Percival Grigori had dictated that Verlaine follow orders to the letter. If Grigori wanted to meet on the moon, Verlaine would have found a way to get there.

He waited for traffic to clear. The statue at the center of Columbus Circle rose before him, an imposing figure of Christopher Columbus poised atop a pillar of marble, framed by the sinuous, barren trees of Central Park. Verlaine thought it an ugly, overmannered piece of sculpture, gaudy and out of place. As he walked past, he noticed a stone angel carved into the base of the plinth, a marble globe of the world in its fingers. The angel was so lifelike that it appeared as if it would come unmoored from the monument entirely, lift over the bustle of taxis, and rise into the smoky heavens above Central Park.

Ahead, the park was a tangle of leafless trees and snow-covered walkways. Verlaine went past a hot-dog vendor warming his hands over a gust of steam, past nannies pushing baby carriages, past a magazine kiosk. The benches at the edge of the park were empty. Nobody in his right mind would take a walk on such a cold afternoon.

Verlaine glanced at his watch again. He was late, something he wouldn't worry about under normal circumstances—he was often five or ten minutes behind schedule for appointments, attributing his tardiness to his artistic temperament. Today, however, timing mattered. His client would be counting the minutes, if not the seconds. Verlaine straightened his tie, a bright blue 1960s Hermès with a repeating pattern of yellow fleurs-de-lis that he had won on an eBay auction. When he was uncertain about a situation or felt that he might appear ill at ease, he tended to choose the quirkiest clothes in his closet. It was an unconscious response, a bit of self-sabotage that he noticed only after it was too late. First dates and job interviews were particularly bad. He would show up looking as if he'd stepped out of a circus tent, with every article of clothing mismatched and too colorful for the situation at hand. Clearly this meeting had made him jittery: In addition to

the vintage tie, he wore a red pin-striped button-up shirt, a white corduroy sport jacket, jeans, and his favorite pair of Snoopy socks, a gift from an ex-girlfriend. He had really outdone himself.

Pulling his overcoat closer, glad that he could hide behind its soft, neutral gray wool, Verlaine took a deep breath of cold air. He clutched the dossier tight, as if the wind might tear it from his fingers, and walked deeper through the whorls of snowflakes into Central Park.