



# ***Twist of Time***

A Novel By

Aidan Stonecross

# *Twist of Time*

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*To my beloved Jodi — against whom all are measured and found wanting.*

# Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate to know several priests as friends, rather than clergy, who have shared some of their difficulties and triumphs.

I am especially grateful to the Anglican monks of the Benedictine Brothers of Mt. Calvary, Santa Barbara, who after their monastery was tragically destroyed by fire, continue to work and inspire many of all faiths and no faith.

## CHAPTER ONE

The nude woman's body had no head.

Homicide Detective Kaitlyn "Kate" Flynn first thought it was obscured by the thick undergrowth of sumac brush where the body lay. Moving closer, she was startled to see only the stub of neck edged with a ring of dried, black blood. Even for a veteran cop of 35 the unexpected can shock; no head was very unexpected. It was the first body she had ever seen without one.

There was an instance of dizziness; Kate swore under her breath as she tried to cover her reaction from the uniformed officer watching. His name was Lester Hicks, twice passed over for promotion, he was a dough-pudgy jerk, and a gossip. She had been in the department little more than a year and was still fighting currents of male resentment. Almost fainting? The last thing she needed was to have it noised around Homicide that she was shaken by a body. Hick's smirk told her she did not pull it off.

"The hands are gone too." He seemed pleased. "Even the feet."

She moved for a closer look. The idiot got that part right, both hands and feet were missing. There were multiple stab wounds on the body. She carefully looked for defense wounds, and discovered a circular abrasion on the left wrist. A similar mark on both wrists would suggest handcuffs being jerked around, a single abrasion might be a security cuff attached to a briefcase.

No head—no dental; no hands and feet—no prints. Her killer was very determined to prevent identification. Kate would have bet her bra there would be no prints on the body. This looked textbook—a pro.

Hicks grinned, showing broken teeth, a souvenir from an ex-wife who finally took exception to his abuse. "I think she was killed someplace else and dumped here."

"Really? Dam, I thought it was road rage." The man was an imbecile.

"Two hikers found her. Teenagers, dude and a girl. They are waiting in my cruiser."

"You question them?"

“Yeah. They are spooked; probably the head thing. They had come down off that upper trail.” He indicated the dirt road about 30 yards above. “And here she was.”

They were interrupted by the sound of a vehicle up on the road. Kate expected to see the forensic van, but it was another Santa Barbara police cruiser. The door on the passenger side opened and a man got out. The officer pointed toward Kate; the man nodded his thanks and started walking down the hill toward her.

From habit, she sized him up as if writing a report; five eleven to six one, one eighty five to one ninety five, age, thirty-eight to forty-three; even features, ruddy complexion, close clipped graying hair, wearing jeans, a leather jacket and running sneakers.

He moved easily with a confidence no clothing hides. It seemed to her that everything about him was wrong. He should be dressed in a monk's robe like the others at the monastery on the mountain above Santa Barbara. He should be soft and pale and have a weird haircut. He was too young—shouldn't monks be old like in the movies? And he should definitely not be attractive. Obviously, this was the wrong guy.

“Detective Flynn? I'm Thomas Bardsey.”

It was the right guy. “Thanks for coming,” Kate said. “I thought you'd be wearing a monk's habit.”

“I do at the monastery. Outside, we usually dress civilian. I came—he saw the body. “My God.”

“You reported a missing person two days ago, a Denise Hollander. This woman was found this morning. Since there is no, uh, head, we hoped you could make an ID at the scene. Maybe might recognize her from identifying marks on the body.”

“I'm a monk.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I've never seen her naked.”

“I get that. Sorry.”

“Besides, a head wouldn't help; I have no idea what she looks like.”

“Didn't you report her missing?”

“Yes. But we've never met. She flew in from New York two days ago. We had an appointment to meet at the monastery. When she didn't show, I phoned her company and they said she arrived in Los Angeles. She had called her boss from her cell phone driving to Santa Barbara. So, I notified the police.” He frowned. “Isn't all that in my missing person report?”

“I haven't seen it yet. Homicide woke me at home and said you would meet me.” She softened her tone, changing the subject might help him relax. “I've never seen a monk out of uniform. I'm Catholic too—terminally lapsed.”

“I'm not Catholic. I'm Anglican.”

“I didn't know they had monks.”

“Monks, nuns, the priests can marry; even have women priests. We have all the problems.”

Her responding laugh and the spark in her eyes were delightful. His gaze went from her eyes to her breasts, and surprised by the instant attraction, from her body to the dead body. Even then the feeling lingered.

He added. “My only contact with her was phone and email.”

“What were you meeting about?”

“She was bringing me a manuscript. A diary, fourteenth century. Her company asked me to translate it.” He added, “Celtic studies is my field.”

Kate had no idea what that meant. “Is the diary valuable?”

He paused before answering. “Quite valuable.”

“Enough to kill for?”

He delayed another beat. “That would depend upon what's in the translation.”

From the delays, she wondered why he was being evasive. Great start: a reluctant witness. Opening her pad, she scribbled a note.

She looked up at him. “Who wrote the diary?”

“A monk. A Templar Knight named Brychan.”

“Spell it.”



He did. "Rhymes with rye-kan. The 'ch' sounds like a 'k'. A Celtic term meaning royal blood line."

"So, what is a Templar Knight?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The pearl moon was set in a black velvet sky in the coldest March the elders could remember; Anno Domini 1314. Sharp gusts stabbed spears at the two riders and their pack horses. The younger man Sir Brychan rode lead, his gray eyes reading the terrain. His huge companion, Sir Ursus sat slightly forward in the saddle as if anticipating an attack from the dark surrounding woods.

It was the third night since their escape through French King Phillip's lines. They had pressed on for two hard days and nights of cold, dry camps. Despite a late freeze that coated puddles with a skein of ice, the men did not risk wearing their wool, white mantles that would mark them as Templars. Since the brutal execution in Paris of their Master Jacques De Molay, but days ago, King Phillip's bounty on fugitive Templars was paid in gold, not sous or denier.

That night, under the shelter of a towering, burly, spruce, they risked a low fire and roasted chunks of blood sausage on spits. Coarse grained, black rye bread and a comb of honey provided a meager addition. They also brewed a pot of precious kahveh. The roasted dark beans were finely crushed and boiled in water—a taste Templars acquired from Turks during the Crusades. Said to be a craving among them, its heavy aroma was often found in their quarters and camps. Because kahveh was Saracen, most Bishops had prohibited its use. The ban was lifted when Pope Clement himself became partial to it.

Afterward the two men curled together, double cloaked against the freezing wind, and slept in dreamless exhaustion. An iron chest sealed with lead lay between them. On its lid was carved the single word "Veritas".

A few hours earlier a lone scout from a band of outlaws heard the Templar horses moving in the woods and stealthily followed until they made camp. Then he went back for the others; eight predators who hunted the trails for anyone foolish to travel without escort. There had been no travelers for nearly a month, save for a caravan of merchant wagons under the protection of a troop of King's cavalry. The bandits in hiding

could only watch hungrily as the caravan rode past. This time the scout would report there were only two men, four horses and their packs: an easy prize.

Ten days had passed when High Sheriff of Auvergne Sir Gilbert de Bage and his troops rode upon the scene. He was able to tell what occurred that night by the circle of bodies. Now weathered carrion, they lay in a broken ring as they had fallen, a feast for ravening wolves, woods rats and crows.

Sir Gilbert sniffed, believing he could still smell the feff of corpus rot. There was a prickle of hairs on his neck. He had heard similar stories when, as a young squire, he served his great uncle Bors, who had once been a Templar Knight in the last Crusade. The old warrior, when “drunk as a Templar”, would tell him tales hinting of the Order's mysteries. To Sir Gilbert these two must have been Zelotes, a secret band within the Templars. Their fighting left a mark like no other.

The bandits' remains, now only gnawed bones, bits of leathery skin and torn rags, were scattered around a space wide enough for two men side by side in fighting stance. There was an assortment of odd weapons—a few swords, an axe and a broken pruning hook—marking the attackers as robbers, not soldiers. That the weapons lay rusting in the winter weeds meant no one had passed this way.

Gilbert first read the scene as a typical bandit attack. By day, they overwhelmed traveling parties; at night, they killed their prey while they slept. But why had these been so foolish as to attack two Templars standing ready to fight?

The Sheriff laughed out loud when he saw the answer, causing his soldiers to give him a curious look. Inside the circle of bones where the Templars stood, were the charred ashes from their fire as they slept beneath a burley spruce. Being fugitives, the Templars probably were not wearing their white mantles. Nor would the bandits know of the Zelotes' manner of sleeping with one hand clasping a drawn sword. Awakened by any unusual sound, the two would be instantly on their feet, side by side, weapons ready.

His uncle told him that Zelotes were always paired in twos and drilled for countless hours in their peculiar stance, each feeling and sensing the other's move. When Zelotes battled afoot, one warrior fought sinister, left-handed, so that any approach faced a blade or weapon. If there was no shield, the off-hand held a dagger or mace.

Templar Knights were allowed to retreat if the odds were more than three to one; Zelotes never: they won or died where they stood. Many of their brother Templars considered them fanatics. When a pair fought double blade there was a Templar saying, “Two Zelotes, four blades, all dead.”

Looking over the ground, the Sheriff counted seven skulls, two of them split from crown to teeth by a powerful slash. One skull was missing. Eight against two, it would not have mattered had there been a dozen. They were no match against two Zelotes of the Knights Templar.

Brother Brychan edged closer to the fire and removed a scribe's case from the horse pack. Crafted of seasoned cypress and oiled water-pooof ox hide, it was a cherished present from his mother, Lady Gwynn, the year he entered the Templar Order. Placing it on the thick woven horse blanket, Brychan settled back comfortably against the high saddle-bow.

The older Templar, Brother Ursus, placed the cracked kahveh urn where Brychan could reach it. He added a few dry sticks to the fire against the late afternoon chill. A light curl of white smoke rose from the small blaze and filtered through the branches—not enough to give them away.

Brychan set out his writing tools, a crystal vial of fresh ground ink, four selected quills, and a thin blade sharpener. From the scribe case he took out the diary, given to him by Friar Luke, Senior Cleric in the Order. Its cover was oak wood finished in oiled leather with brass fittings and so skillfully fashioned that if submerged in water, it would bob to the surface.

He blew on his fingers and selected a quill. Testing its point with his habitually ink stained thumb, he dipped it, skimming the excess ink on the vial rim. “How many bandits did we fell two nights ago, Brother?”

Brother Ursus thought of it for the first time. “Six or eight. Too dark to be certain. Why are you writing about them?”

Brychan, surprised, looked up at him. “For a record. We neither buried nor prayed over them.”

“No time.”

“Then they should at least be noted here.” Brychan smiled a gentle reproach.

“They attacked us.”

“We did not wear our mantles. Had they known we were Templars they might have been afraid and therefore, spared.”

“Or fought harder to get the bounty on us.” Ursus spat and scowled at the quill lines on the page. He had the natural mistrust of writing common among those who could

not read. Less than half the Templar knights could read or write—that was left to the brother clerics and priests of the Order. Even Grand Master De Molay was illiterate.

Writing was considered beneath warrior monks, the “Poor Soldiers of Christ”. Ursus took justifiable pride in being illiterate for it marked his warrior status. Brother Brychan, who had been schooled from childhood by the Cistercians, was an exception, but then, he was different in many ways.

Ursus grunted. “Your diary will get us burned if we are caught.”

“If we are captured, Brother, we will be truly blessed if burning is all they do.”

Ursus spat again, and from habit peered into the forest gloom, listening for enemies before they might suddenly appear.

Both men were Scots nobility. When talking with each other they spoke English or Scots Gaelic. They also spoke the Norman French dialect still used in some parts of England. Beyond their common languages, the two men differed greatly in age, size and experience.

Brother Ursus was Sir Angus MacTeal, clan MacCallan, Templar knight and monk. By his great bearish bulk he was affectionately called Ursus Scotus, “Scots Bear” and his flaming red hair added greatly to that presence. A fearsome warrior of forty and four years, he was a master of all arms. He had fought in the final campaigns in the Holy Land, where he learned considerable Arabic. After ten years hard service he was initiated into the elite ranks of the Zelotes.

Sir Brychan of Houston, clan Howistean, was twenty seven, a rangy six feet with a duelist’s body. At twenty one, he was knighted a Templar in Paris, among the last to be admitted into the Order. Only seven days later King Phillip the Fair of France ordered the arrest of Master DeMolay and all other Templars on Friday 13, forever known among Templars as “Black Friday”.

From that day Sir Brychan was a fugitive and there followed seven years in hiding. Then, on March 19, on King Phillips orders Jaques De Molay—a worn seventy, exhausted by repeated torture, and five years in prison—was taken from his cell and burned alive by slow roasting at the stake. Hours before his execution, a message was smuggled from prison through the mythic Templar underground. It directly commissioned Brother Brychan a Zelote, and charged him and Ursus, with a secret mission that *must* be followed to the death.

Brother Ursus slowly drew his sword, clearing its sheath with a metallic hiss. “Can you keep watch for me while you write?”

Brychan glanced around. "Yes. Attend your prayers, Brother."

Ursus moved exactly three paces, one for each of the Holy Trinity. He laid his sword on the ground and knelt. Templars who strictly kept the Rule said 24 Pater Nosters and 24 Hail Marys daily, even when traveling. If they were Zelotes, one always kept guard while the other prayed. This was not to prevent their being surprised; its tradition lay in scripture, when Christ, on the night he was betrayed, asked his disciples to keep watch while he prayed. Zelotes always prayed with sword drawn and on the ground beside them.

As he kept watch Brychan wrote in the meticulous script peculiar to the Cistercians. His diary did not record each day, but significant events were noted, like the recent outlaw attack. His writings might include musings, jottings of verse or an inspired moment of prayer written in Latin.

But his most private thoughts were written in Gaelic, for even in his precise Latin, he did not have the words. Only Gaelic, language of the bards, could describe the visions of strange beings and glowing apparitions that came to him in mysterious and fearsome beauty.

To him they were not shadowy phantoms, but solid as earth under his feet, yet light as spring wind. Often they came in his sleep, or at times when he thought he was asleep, only to discover that he had been in a trance and was hurled, as by war catapult, back to the present. Brother Brychan had "the sight", as did his mother, and her mother before her; said to be marked by their gray eyes.

The diary was unusual in other ways. At the front were blank pages on which Brychan wrote. In the back were symbols, rows of figures and numbers: ciphers impossible to read without a key. The codes gave critical access to the Templar financial empire, by far, the wealthiest Order in the Church.

Brychan understood little of the "science of numbers" and less about cyphers. When given the diary, it was explained to him that Templars had a system of banking, using letters of transmittal called "cheques" from the Arabic chess term, "shah mat": checkmate. With these documents money was exchanged without coin or bullion being carried. Anyone could use them: clergy, nobles, kings, even the Pope himself. Merchants had become dependent upon them. The system was so trusted that even after the final fall of Jerusalem to the Saracens, now seventy years past, Templar cheques were still honored throughout the Muslim world.

Brother Ursus knew that for some secret reason, despite Brychan's youth and inexperience, the Order had chosen him to keep the codes and diary. Whatever else it contained, the ciphers alone were worth the killing. But Brychan's writings, if they fell

into the hands of Holy Office of the Inquisition, would mean formal indictment for heresy and witchcraft. That was certain burning.

At the sound of the cry, both men started. An animal? As they looked at each other it came again, a shriek of terror.

Ursus grabbed up his weapon; Brychan stuffed the diary in his writing case and drew his sword. The wail came again from the woods to their left.

Brychan started to move, but Ursus stopped him with a gesture. Then Brychan heard it too, the sound of horses, not running but moving about.

While Brychan kicked out the fire, Ursus sheathed his sword and moved to his pack. He took out a two handed broadsword in its sheath, drew it and wielded it in a wide circle. The two men exchanged a look indicating direction and, still without speaking, moved into the forest.

About fifty paces into the thick brush they were surprised by a sudden rise in the ground. Beyond, they could hear scrambling and the sound of men laughing. They moved up the slope quietly, their steps muffled by stiff frozen weeds. Near the top they dropped to the ground, crawling through thick ground wayz, flecked with frost. They parted a growth of gray thistle and looked below.

In a clearing were four soldiers wearing the yellow livery of the King's cavalry, one on horse, and three afoot. Two were holding a young woman on the ground. One of the men had pulled her skirt up to her waist; she was naked beneath. A burly third trooper had unbuckled his sword; his britches were down to his knees. As the girl cried out he laughed, pulling at his huge erection.

At one side was a caravan wagon hitched with two horses. Its red paint bore decades of weathering, and was farded with a hanging collection of leather and metalwork. On the ground lay the hacked body of an old man—his white hair wrapped in a cloth: Gypsies.

Brychan and Ursus looked at each other. With the King's price on their heads, to interfere would give them away to the soldiers. Besides, the girl was a Gypsy; this was none of their affair.

As they were about to turn away, the woman kicked the rapist hard in the ballocks. He yelped, sprawling to the ground. She twisted free and jumped to her feet, running. Two soldiers scrambled after her. One caught the back of her blouse as she frantically pulled away.

Cursing, the soldier yanked, ripping her blouse, revealing breasts and a crucifix on a chain.

“Jesus, help me!” she screamed.

Brychan and Ursus looked at each other astonished. Neither had seen a naked woman in years, nor ever heard of Christian Gypsies. But Zelotes were bound by the first Templar rule: to protect all Christian travelers no matter who they were, or where traveling.

The woman now was on the ground in a desperate struggle with three soldiers. One held her arms while a second choked her into submission; the rapist was on his knees between her legs, brutally forcing them apart.

A trooper on horseback, watching them, sensed something. His hand was on his sword handle even before he looked back. He turned into the powerful slash of a two handed sword that almost cut him in half at the waist.

The soldier choking the girl looked up to see the mounted trooper fall in two pieces. Beside the horse was a Goliath of a man who charged with a huge broadsword. Two soldiers jumped up, swords drawn. The rapist’s weapon lay on the ground halfway between him and the giant.

A second warrior suddenly appeared out of the brush to their right. He carried a sword, but no shield. The giant halted his charge; it had been merely a diversion until his comrade appeared. Now, both men slowly edged sideways in opposite directions, forcing the two cavalymen to face out.

The rapist was struggling clumsily with his britches entangled on one of his spurs. His pants were wrapped around his knees; arse bare, erection withered.

The girl crawled to the side, even more terrified. These were not rescuers, only two more dogs fighting over the same piece of meat.

The giant roared, “Baucent!” Swinging the broadsword in a great arc, he closed with the first soldier. The cavalryman defended with a two handed parry. Each ringing clash took him another step back, separating him from the others.

Brychan attacked the second man with a flurry that forced his opponent immediately to give ground. The trooper, a veteran sergeant, was bewildered; from its sound his opponent’s blade was a Toledo. It could cost nearly as much as a knight’s armor yet, was wielded by one dressed rough, neither peasant nor noble.

Ursus continued his attack, a mix of intricate quick swings and turns. His broad sword was almost six feet, and longer than any of the cavalymen had ever faced. As the soldier stumbled backwards, his face blanched; this terrible giant was using him for practice.

The rapist ripped his britches free from the spur, pulled them up, and ran for his sword.

Ursus saw him running but stayed focused on his opponent. He feinted a slash, then, swiftly reversed. The blade slammed against the soldier's side, making no cut in the mail but shattering half his rib cage. The man's eyes rolled, his sword dropped, and Ursus' blade pierced his throat.

Brychan pressed his attack on the sergeant who had judged the sword was Toledo, its ringing voice like no other. The wily veteran tactically began to give ground, tempting Brychan to overextend his blade.

Reading him, Brychan stopped in mid-swing, leaving the sergeant's arm extended. A swift inside slash caught the exposed elbow, severing it cleanly. Clutching both hands on his sword, Brychan slammed the sergeant's neck with a sharp crack. A deep thrust took him center as he was falling.

Ursus turned to face the rapist who had retrieved his sword. The soldier was huge, but bulf and clumsy. He parried solidly against Ursus' assault, but with each backward step his britches crept down exposing his arse. When his blade missed with a desperate parry, Ursus slashed a scarlet gap across the lard white belly.

The man groaned and dropped to his knees, grabbing at his spilling guts. With a merciful blow, Ursus severed his head.

Ursus looked wryly at Brychan. "Well, he was nae' Scot; they love fighting bare arsed."

Both looked around; all the cavalymen lay dead. The fight had lasted less than a hundred count.

The girl watched them; one hand clutched her torn dress, desperately covering her nakedness. She held a dagger from a fallen trooper.

Brychan raised his open hand two fingers raised in a blessing, "We mean you no harm."

She snarled, raising the blade higher.



“We are Templars.”

“Templars?” She suspiciously eyed their rough clothing. Both were clean-shaven, unlike Templars known for their full beards.

“And fugitives.” he added.

Dropping the dagger, she ran to the dead Gypsy. Falling on her knees she began wailing and throwing handfuls of dirt in the air and on herself in the Gypsy manner of grief.

“Who was he?” Brychan asked.

“My Uncle.” She looked at the dead soldiers, closed her eyes, and cursed a chatter of Romany sending their souls to hell.

Ursus slowly scanned the surrounding trees as if listening. “We must go. Their troop is close by.”

Brychan turned to the girl. “Come to our camp.” He ignored Ursus' angry look. “We'll take you to the nearest village.”

Ursus shook his head. “No. Her wagon will slow us.”

“Then, she must leave it.”

The girl indicated her uncle's body. “He is an elder, and must burn in the wagon. It is our way.”

Ursus, looking at the trees, spoke in Gaelic. “Leave. Now.”

Brychan had learned to trust Brother Ursus' instincts. His ability to sense trouble was a cause for wonder among their fellow Templars. Ursus explained that “he listened to the trees”, a Celt way of divining. Many believed that he simply had hearing like a fox, while others were convinced that God had given him a special gift.

Brychan motioned to the girl. “Come.”

“He must burn in the wagon!”

“No!” Ursus argued. “Smoke will draw the soldiers.”

“Woman, get your belongings.” Brychan's tone left no argument. He made the sign of the cross over the dead Gypsy.

While Ursus collected the cavalry mounts Brychan unhitched the two draft horses from the Gypsy wagon. They were good stock, well tended. He gave each a firm pat on their bruffed winter coats and offered a prayer that some lucky peasant might find them before the wolves.

Ursus selected the largest stallion to carry his bulk and led the other three horses to the Gypsy wagon.

When the girl stepped from behind the wagon door she had changed clothes and wore a long leather cloak lined with thick fleece. She carried a finely tooled leather satchel and a heavy canvass bag of provisions; Gypsies never leave food behind. Ursus took the parcels from her, and hung them on the harness rig of a pack horse.

From the wagon seat, she nimbly climbed on a stallion revealing a luscious flash of leg as she curled it around the pommel to ride sidesaddle. The glimpse took Brychan's breath. As she expertly grasped the reins, he was reminded that Gypsies were notorious horse thieves.

With a grieving look back at her uncle's body, she followed the two knights.

By custom, when in the forest, Zelotes rode in silence to avoid their sound carrying. Brychan was relieved that the girl did not talk; her instincts were as keen as theirs. He wondered if it was the nature of all Gypsies from their way of living apart.

As they were approaching their camp, both men sensed something wrong. Ursus spurred his horse and broke from the tree cover with Brychan close behind.

They reined up, staring in confused shock. The horses were gone. And the chest.

Ursus pointed to the skyline of a distant hill, which cut an arc half covering the setting sun. They could see the silhouette of three riders leading all four of their horses as they disappeared over the horizon.

Brychan spied his writing case half-covered by a blanket. Jumping off his horse, he ran and fell to his knees. With trembling hands he opened it.

The diary was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake's was Santa Barbara's vintage diner where savory, greasy fries in brown gravy were a cardiac hazard, and burly coffee in thick porcelain mugs could revive a coma. It was the police hangout for heavy carbs or a caffeine kick.

Kate and Thomas had come directly from the crime scene. Thomas was enjoying a second coffee as he watched her eat.

Kate was devouring the "Lumberjack" special: eggs, bacon, sausage, and a mound of hash browns high as the flapjacks. At his look, she smiled. "I never gain weight. In my will I am leaving my metabolism to medical science."

"As a monk, you'd starve in a week."

"Were you always a monk?"

"Were you always a cop?"

She laughed. "I'm sorry. Women are curious about priests and monks. We wonder—well, you know."

"No, I'm not gay, which is what you really wanted to ask. In another life I had a career, a wife, a mortgage, even a bulldog named Merlin."

"You were married?"

"Yes."

"Divorced?"

"She died."

"Oh, dam. I'm sorry. Why do we always think divorced first?"

"Maybe because you are divorced?" At her surprised look he smiled. "A guess. You don't wear a wedding ring, most married women do. You surely had offers. You must have taken one of them."

She colored lightly at the compliment. "Yep. A big mistake."

"Was he a cop?"

"LAPD; I was homicide, he was vice—the perfect couple. Then one day he announced he didn't want to be married anymore." She paused. "Why do men always say that?"

“Do they?”

“Anyway, he left me for another woman in her twenties with a cute twist. She was a hooker he once arrested.”

“That must have been—”

“It was.” She gave a stiff smile. “Bottom line, I resigned from the LAPD and came home to Santa Barbara over a year ago. They were short handed in Homicide and I had the credentials. Except for pissing off half the force trying to make detective, it’s been boringly routine. Now thanks to you I get murder, mutilation, and your weird diary. You’ve made my year.”

He slowly shook his head. “Ms. Hollander, poor woman.”

“Tragic. Apparently they killed the messenger bringing the diary to you. I wonder had she been a man if she would have been so—desecrated. Bastards.” She looked at him. “How did you first get involved with the diary?”

“After I came to the monastery. I’ve only been a monk for a year. A few months ago I was contacted by Winslow Fallon, the head of MedTek. You’ve heard of him?”

“Vaguely. One of those computer moguls?”

“And very eccentric. In addition to his billion dollar personal empire, he has a passion for collecting rare books and manuscripts. Especially anything on the Templars. Like the diary.”

She took out her note pad again. “What makes the diary so special?”

“It is a legend in the rare book world. Some experts believe it is bogus, either a fake or forgery. Others say it is cursed, bringing death or tragedy to anyone connected with it. It has all the clichés.”

“Sounds like voodoo,” she chuckled.

“Voodoo or the occult or whatever, for 700 years it has disappeared then reappeared. Recently it surfaced in the hands of Lazlo Reiner. He is the perfect image of ‘shady dealer’. Yet, Fallon was convinced of the diary’s authenticity and he paid Reiner two million dollars for it.”

“Two million?”

“Shortly afterward, Reiner was murdered.”

“Looks like the voodoo is still working.” She wrote Reiner’s name. “Anything in the diary that could be a motive for murder?”

“Millions in hidden Templar wealth—according to the legend.”

“All this over a legend?”

“But based on historical fact. Whatever it is, for 700 years people have been killing for something in the diary.”

“Tell me more about the Templars.”

He thought a moment trying to simplify. “First; forget all that stuff in popular novels. Good fiction, bad history. The Templars were never associated with Mary Magdalene. Never. That’s pure myth. Second, they were never historically connected with the Holy Grail. That’s both legend and fiction written by three medieval writers, early novelists.”

“Then, what were they?”

“An Order of warrior monks established in the Twelfth century and lasting about 200 years. They were highly disciplined and very secretive. Each member took a death vow.”

“Like the Mafia?”

“Only much tougher and more powerful. Though small in number, Templars were considered by the Saracens to be fiercest of the Crusaders, sort of elite Special Forces. They answered only to the Pope, his private little army and paid no taxes. In a few years the Order became the richest in the church. Eventually, Templars became the main bankers for all of Europe.”

“I’m an obsessively suspicious cop; what went wrong?”

“Jump to the year 1314. King Phillip of France was nearly bankrupt and wanted to finance another war. He was already deeply in debt to the Templars. So, he came up with a simple solution: he went after the Templar wealth. Working with the Inquisition, he trumped up charges of heresy. In a single day he raided every Templar site in France. It was the first mass arrest in history. But the treasure was gone.”

“Gone where?”

“That’s the mystery. Somehow, the Templars knew of the king’s plans. A few days before the raid, they secretly moved about 100 wagons of their assets: gold, jewels and bouillon. Everything was loaded on 18 ships. They sailed away and were never seen again. It was like robbing the Bank of England and coming up empty.”

"I bet the king was pissed."

"He burned about 150 of their leaders at the stake. Thousands more were tortured and imprisoned."

"That's pissed."

"But he never found the money. If the diary is proven authentic, it could be the key to finding at least some of the Templar treasure. Multimillions; if it exists."

She said as she wrote, "Homicide motive: money," and closed the notepad. "How did Fallon learn about you?"

"From my doctoral thesis on the wizard Merlin."

"King Arthur's Merlin?"

"The same. King Arthur may be just legend. But I discovered a document that suggests Merlin actually existed and lived a secret double life. He was not just a wizard; he was also a bishop and became a Saint in the Celtic Church under another name. I dumbed-down my thesis and it was published as a pop culture history. That's when Fallon contacted me."

Kate, on unfamiliar ground, shook her head. "How did you ever get into this Celtic stuff?"

"Born to it," he smiled. "My grandfather was a Scot and taught Celtic studies at Edinburgh University. My father, an American, went there and ended up marrying the professor's daughter, my mother. Grandfather Andrew insisted that I be raised half Scot. I spent every summer in Scotland with him. Gaelic became my second language."

She thought for a moment. "Okay, look. The diary is physical evidence in my homicide, but it is written in several languages and has a complex history. Would you be willing to help us?"

"I need permission from my Abbot."

She held out her cell phone. "Ask him."

Father Abbot Methodius listened impatiently as Thomas explained the situation. Methodius rolled his eyes; Thomas was incredibly unpredictable, from his controversial past, to recently persuading Fallon to pay half a million to the monastery for the diary translation. Now, he is involved in a murder investigation? He is a monk for God's sake! They must have a serious talk, and soon.

As Methodius listened, he flashed again on the half million the monastery hoped to receive from Fallon and saw all the planned renovations suddenly disappearing.

The Abbot interrupted. “Brother Thomas, you must do everything to help the police recover the diary. Under no circumstances do we want to alienate Winslow Fallon.”

After they left the diner, Kate decided not to go to the precinct. They were talking easily on a first name basis; their empathy was growing. Sometimes this dries up in official surroundings, so she decided to drive to the bay.

While they rode and talked she quickly became aware how different he was from the men she knew. She had always dated men from her world; law enforcement, lawyers, a PI or two. Their small talk was work related. Thomas was very different. Maybe it was the way he thought and expressed himself—very distinctive. Highly intelligent. And vaguely disturbing.

When she turned off the 101, she noticed the dark car hanging three back. It seemed to be switching to whatever lane she took. Who tails a cop? Or was her imagination working overtime? When the car suddenly exited, she decided not to mention it.

It was a decision she would regret.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Santa Barbara wharf was less crowded than usual, Kate and Thomas sat on a bench savoring the gentle breeze with its heavy tang of salt. While talking, they watched a gaggle of brown pelicans disdainfully strut through a group of tourists.

“Frankly, Kate, the only thing I know about detectives is from TV. Mind if I ask some dumb questions?”

She smiled. “My dad, the retired super cop, says the only dumb question is one you’ve asked twice before.”

“I like the way he thinks,” Thomas chuckled. “Since you don’t have any witnesses nor evidence what do you do next?”

“We concentrate on getting the diary. It is our case. And it is loaded. First, it is the motive. That usually leads to the killer or killers. Secondly, billionaire Fallon is going to want it back. Which means that somebody else is after it too. More people; more suspects. Also, from the diary’s history, it might contain clues to other homicides. But most of all no diary; no indictment. Without it, the judge would throw this case out. Period.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“That’s why we try and keep it simple. A good homicide detective should try to think like a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Well, a smart dog. When my dad started as a cop, his partner was a German Shepherd named Shotzie. When a dog enters a crime scene their nose tells them a lot about the past 24 hours. If I could do the same, I’d know how many had been there, how long ago, and most of all I’d recognize them if we met, even though I’d never seen them before. Homicide detectives spend a lot of time trying to get the same results some other way.”

“Okay, Detective Shotzie; why would they dismember Denise Hollander’s head and hands to prevent identification then leave the body near a public park trail where it would be easily discovered?”



“A dumb mistake. I think they goofed when they dumped the body at night. Entering by the upper dirt road, it appears you’re in the woods. Actually, it’s been a make-out spot since I was in high school. Lots of traffic. Whoever did it doesn’t know the area. The killer isn’t some bored soccer mom; they’re from out of town.”

“So, they followed the courier here.”

“Definitely.” She thought of something else. “You said the diary could be a fake? How did you mean?”

“If it is a fake, it is brilliant. Brychan, wrote separate parts in four languages: Medieval English, French, Latin and Gaelic. Fallon had some of it translated, but none of the Gaelic, that was to be my job. Supposedly, the Gaelic contains the most important information—whatever that is.” Thomas opened his wallet and took out a paper and unfolded it. “Brychan left a tantalizing clue in English from the diary. Fallon sent it when he first contacted me. I wrote it down to trigger my imagination.” He handed it to her.

Kate read it out loud stumbling over several words.

“Beefor ye cross three werriors stand

Ant gurds ye last one of our band

Luves face schining shews ye wey

A werriors measure ends ye lai”

She gave a questioning look. “This is English?”

“Middle English, around the time of Chaucer. Spelling was not yet uniform, but you can make sense of it phonetically. Three warriors stand before a cross guarding a treasure which is hidden or buried among some band or group.”

“I get that. Sort of.”

“Then it turns into a love verse, typical of the period. ‘Love’s face shining shows the way; a warrior’s measure ends the lay’. A lay is a narrative poem. This is like having the last piece of a puzzle but nothing that came before.”

Kate again sensed that he was withholding something. She decided not to press it, for now. Besides, it was time to take him home.

The mountain road back to the monastery was a run of narrow tight turns with a steep drop-off on one side to a ravine below. The tires squealed in protest as Kate cornered the curves. Thomas nervously glanced at her.

She grinned. "My two brothers and I raced cars all through high school and college. I wanted to be a NASCAR driver."

"Should I pray or jump and hope for the best?"

She laughed. Kate liked his humor; other than holding back when discussing the diary, he was easy to talk with. That was a pleasant relief. As a driven cop, her reputation for bluntness often caused negative evaluation reports when questioning witnesses and suspects. She had a low tolerance for fools whether fellow cops or smart-ass perps. The criticisms, she admitted, were often justified.

Thomas was enjoying their easy rapport but still found her attractiveness disturbing. Once again, in mid-sentence he found his eyes locked on her legs. Look away, dammit. He almost said it out loud.

At the crest of the mountain, Kate pulled in the parking lot of Saint Joseph's monastery of the Anglican Celtic Order. With its Spanish style architecture it looked like a Catholic convent, which it once was. After he got out of the car, there was an awkward pause.

"Thomas, I have to ask. Why would any sane man in the Twenty First Century become a monk and live in a monastery?"

"That has been asked since the first monks." His eyes were steady but teasing. "I suspect it has something to do with temptation."

Surprised by his answer, she decided not to go there. "In a convent I wouldn't last a week." Kate waved and drove away.

On the drive down the mountain she wondered at the irony. There had been absolutely no interest in a man since her tortuous divorce. She now wondered; am I so neurotic that I am becoming attracted to a religious eunuch?

The only thing safer than a monk was a dead man. She made a mental note to call her therapist, Dr. Ruby Stein. She could already hear her laughing.

\* \* \* \* \*

The two Templars and the Gypsy girl made camp under lofty towers of evergreen sighing in the cold north wind. Brychan was watching as she moved about cooking their meal. She had told him her name was Sara, and she was born in a caravan near Cadiz, Spain.

She was preparing a stew of dried lentils with blood sausage and a winter hare that Ursus shot with his bow. From her spice bag she added wild onion, wild garlic, Spanish peppers and black truffles. Brychan and Ursus shared an uneasy look; they believed that truffles were poisonous, like many mushrooms.

From the Templar's food supply, Sara searched for bread. She unwrapped a damp linen bundle containing a rock hard end of rye with a beard of black mold.

Brychan stopped her before she could throw it away. "That's not food. It's for dressing wounds."

"Wounds?"

"Put the mold next to the wound and wrap it. Leave it two days, then, do it again."

Sara wondered how anyone could believe such filth was medicine? She heard that some Gadjay kept dogs in their houses. All Roma dogs stayed outside unless they were sick. She said a silent prayer that if she were injured, neither knight would attempt to treat her.

Brychan had seen few Gypsies; they had yet to reach the British Isles in great numbers. Arriving in France but a generation ago, she told him that they called themselves Roma. "Gypsy" was what outsiders, the Gadjay, called them.

From his interest in languages, Brychan had heard that Romany was unlike any other. A mysterious people, Gypsies told fortunes and possessed healing ways with animals, especially horses. They also crafted peerless silver and leather work. Known for their cunning, to be tricked by them was to be "gypped."

While she was cooking, Brychan eagerly talked with her. He had been especially curious how a Gypsy happened to be a Christian. She explained that the Roma first arrived as Christian pilgrims under protection of the Holy Roman Emperor. They

practiced their faith in their own way, retaining some old traditions. Their patron Saint Sara was said to have been servant to Mary Magdalene. Saint Sara was her own namesake.

Brychan watched fascinated as she worked. Her raven hair matched ebony dark eyes; she was wondrously bloss and well proportioned with large breasts. She moved easily when doing woman's work yet, when riding a horse, she was gaynley as a man.

Ursus listened critically as they talked. Of all the Orders in the Church the Templars were strictest about women. Her very presence violated their vows. A Templar must never be alone with a woman, private conversation with one was forbidden, no woman could enter a Templar building or church without permission. To travel with one was unthinkable. Ursus feared that if they were discovered by another Templar, they would be reported, and have to serve the required year's hard penance.

The men were hungry and the first bite was a surprise, both delicious and hearty. Ursus, hoping her Gypsy cooking would taste foul, could remember nothing so good in months.

The Templar rule at meals was to eat in contemplative silence or hear scripture read by a brother. But this day brought "sufficient evil" as noted in Proverbs and therefore must be talked through. Sara listened intently as they carefully tried to reason through their strange situation.

After the robbery, they had searched the baggage, salvaging whatever they could. The thieves took the "Veritas" chest, the diary, and their horses. But they left behind clothing, food, their weapons; even their purse of money. What thief doesn't steal money?

The robbers were traveling overland north, probably to Paris. But to follow with inferior horses would make catching them impossible.

To Brychan, the solution was to ignore their trail, push their horses through a very difficult overland route and wait in ambush.

Ursus was opposed. If they guessed wrong going overland, they could lose the robbers.

Sara asked, "Are you sure they are going to Paris?"

"So it appears," Brychan said.

“The Roma go to Paris every year before Lent to sell to the crowds. We know ways to avoid the King’s soldiers.” Her eyes were solemn. “You saved my life. I will lead you.”

Brychan looked at Ursus who was shaking his head. “Brother Ursus, we are following with cavalry horses. The thieves ride our German breed—unmatched for endurance. Once they know we are following, they need only release the slow pack horses. We will never catch them.”

Ursus understood horses better than anyone Brychan knew. In the Holy Land he was taught by the Bedouin who know their horses like family. It was said that he could follow a trail over trackless rock.

Ursus glared at the woman; once again she was causing trouble—as was their way.

Brychan read his look. “Brother, the Rule concerning women should be ignored when weighed against our mission. We must not fail.”

Nodding, and to avoid further argument about the woman, Ursus rose and moved beyond the firelight. He stared at the trees silhouetted against the starry sky and slipped into deep meditation while listening to the whispering night.

Sherif Sir Gilbert de Bage ordered his men to halt and make camp. It was too dark to continue tracking by torch. Even the relentless Templars would be forced to stop.

He had begun pursuing them the day he found eight dead bandits in the forest. It did not matter that the Templars slaughtered outlaws who would have been hanged immediately if caught. King Phillip’s bounty on Templars was paid in gold besants. As High Sherif serving the Duke of Auvergne, Sir Gilbert could keep all bounty for himself.

When he started his pursuit, the Templars had more than seven days lead. That changed when the Sherif came across the bodies of four King’s Cavalry and an old Gypsy.

At first, Gilbert doubted they were connected. Why would two Templars kill a total of twelve men when they could simply avoid fighting? The Sherif, who well knew weapons and modes of combat, carefully examined the dead. His experience told him almost as much as if he witnessed the fight. The larger Templar was clearly a master of the two handed broadsword. One trooper was nearly cut in half while mounted; another’s ribs were crushed beneath his mail; a third was gutted and beheaded.

The second Templar who slew the sergeant had a sword that could easily pierce mail with a pointed thrust. Most probably a Toledo blade.

Strangest of all, they stole the horses. No Templar is a mere horse thief. Yet, two on foot attacked and killed four King's cavalry and took their horses; proof that they were either demons or Zelotes. He was surprised to discover that when he followed their trail heading north, another set of tracks revealed that the Templars were also following someone.

For three grueling days the Sheriff mercilessly had pushed his men, closing the gap. The Templars were now only two or three days distant. They did not know they were being followed. This would give the Sheriff a much needed advantage when they met.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas was out early the next morning. He had just made a delivery of "Monks Bread" to the Community Food Bank. The job rotated among the monks, and it was his turn.

The delivery truck was an ancient Econo van with a prima-donna ignition that started on whim. After cranking easily that morning, now when Thomas turned the key, it grunted once, and died.

He got out and raised the hood without the vaguest idea what to do. He was offering a quick prayer when someone approached him from behind.

"Are you one of the Monk's Bread people?"

As Thomas turned, he was stunned by a blow with a searing burst of light. He fell to the ground. When he looked up, there was a dark sedan backing toward him.

Two men jerked him to his feet, and shoved him toward the car.

"Freeze! Police!"

All turned to see Kate, shielded by the open door of an unmarked car, leveling an automatic.

The men hit Thomas again and he dropped to his knees. The two jumped into the waiting car and it cut across traffic so that Kate could not fire because of the other cars. In seconds they were gone.

She rushed to him. "Don't get up. I'm calling the paramedics."

He managed to stand. "What are you doing here?"

She began dabbing his bleeding head with her handkerchief. "Yesterday I thought we might be tailed. I followed you today to see if I could spot anyone. I never thought you would be attacked."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I would look silly if I were wrong."

"Next time, look silly."

"God, I am so sorry." His warm scent blended with a tang of crushed lemon verbena from working the herb garden. She could almost taste him. "I'm taking you to the ER."

"No. I'm okay."

"Do you feel well enough to eat?"

"Monks are always hungry."

"Good. Fallon is flying in on his private jet to meet us for brunch."

\* \* \* \* \*

Half a block away, in a parked car, four men had been watching the assault. One of them, Sid Carver, swore. "Christ! How many are after this dude?"

\* \* \* \* \*

In a luxury suite at the Hilton off the 101 in Santa Barbara, Nola Hamlin paced in growing irritation. Ravel Marinero, mid-forties, stood waiting patiently. His dark olive face was born to have numbers under it. His plastic windbreaker beaded droplets from a thundershower but he was not invited to dry off. His dark predator eyes followed her.

Nola, smoking a brown cigarette, moved through a maze of assorted Vuitton luggage scattered on the floor. She was middle age, expensively dressed in muted tans and brown. At first look, most men would consider her attractive, but something in her eyes hinted of madness, brilliance, or both.

She looked up as if suddenly remembering he was there. "How do you know she really is a cop? Did she show a badge?"

"No. A gun."

Her laugh was punctuated by a raspy smoker's cough. "Three of you; one of her and you still didn't get the monk?"

"She was a cop," he repeated. "You didn't say the monk had police protection."

She didn't argue. In spite of his unimpressive appearance, Ravel was a professional operative. Mixed Puerto Rican and Basque, he was respected by several radical groups in Europe. She could not afford to make him angry; she needed him. "Would you recognize her again?"

"Sure."

"Kill her. Grab him." Her flat tone had no trace of emotion. She looked away but he stood waiting. "Go."

After the door closed she grabbed a porcelain table lamp and hurled it against the wall, sending pieces flying. Surprised, she felt better.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sid Carver and his team had been following the monk that morning, they watched from their car; saw him being attacked, and the cop's rescue. A few weeks earlier, Carver—known as the Broker—had been hired by "Mysterious Leo" to put a team together for an operation with the monk as Subject/Target. Carver had worked for Leo twice before but they never met. Connections were always through a middle man named Victor. He only knew Leo by reputation: "very, very nasty". The last job for him had been an illegal arms deal. When the other side discovered Leo was involved, they caved on the price. Carver was very impressed.

When Carver reported to Leo's contact what happened with the monk that morning, Leo sent word insisting on a meeting that same day. Now late in the afternoon, the team waited in a stale motel room. Leo, who seldom met personally with anyone he hired, was coming from where ever he was on the planet. This made Carver very edgy.

He looked his team over again, trying to anticipate the weakest link. Steiner, the oldest was German whose reputation went back to the Bader Meinhoff terrorist gang. He was experienced and rock steady. Wojowitz worked mainly for Israeli gangs



operating in the States. His survival instincts must have been incredible because he also kept ties with several competing Russian drug lords. Grigsby was mob muscle, big, mean, with a vicious rep. Oddly he was also known to be “pussy whipped” by his wife, which nobody mentioned unless suddenly seized by a death wish. Alonzo was Columbian cartel. He seldom spoke, but watched everything and everyone with a half smile. Carter suspected the smile didn’t change even when he pulled the trigger.

While they waited, Carver was surprised that they asked only questions about the monk. Otherwise, it didn’t seem to matter who they worked for. Besides, Carver did not really know; anything Leo told him would have been cover or a lie.

When Leo finally entered the room, to Carver’s surprise, he was alone. He had expected an entourage or several body guards. Leo was African, another surprise, though it was known that he was not American. One look confirmed his badass reputation. He was expensively dressed, of average height with an attitude reeking power and fear. There was even the rumor that some became sick in his presence. Now, Carver believed it.

Without a word, Leo carefully studied each face. Although they all were pros and expensive, the operation was too sensitive to rely on simply buying their services. Absolute secrecy was essential. Unknown to them, each was chosen with a vulnerable key that could be wound to the breaking point. Leo was keeper of the keys.

Apparently satisfied, Leo stepped back, and smiled. The smile did not reach his eyes, black holes from which no light escaped.

Carver now sensed the unmistakable taint of solitary confinement; Leo had spent a lot of time alone. He was wearing leather dress gloves in summer—no careless prints. This guy covered everything.

When Leo finally spoke, his voice was surprisingly soft with no accent except for a slight musical lilt. “The monk is your only priority. Understood?”

One or two nodded; nobody spoke.

“Any order, you will obey. No questions.” He looked at Carver. “Is that absolutely clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Carver answered.

Grigsby, the broody hulk with empty eyes, cleared his throat. “Like, when you say 'any order', does that...”

“It means precisely any order.” Leo glanced at Carver for confirmation. Carver nodded.

Leo looked again at each face, fixing it in memory. “No failure. No excuses.”

He walked out of the room, leaving a chill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before meeting Fallon for brunch, Kate Googled him for a quick background. His billions were not the result of some nerd working out of his garage. Driven by a genius I.Q. and what was described as a “matching neurosis” he graduated high school at 15. After receiving Ph.D. in Biochemistry specializing in brain research at Cal Tech, Fallon earned a Master's at MIT in computer science. He immediately started his own company, MedTek, specializing in software for cutting edge medical research. Though highly successful, the company was also controversial.

Aside from legitimate research and development MedTek's main notoriety came from experiments with animals on behavior modification utilizing computer chip brain implants. Various corporations had done similar experiments, but Fallon's publicity organization claimed his work the cutting edge “in New Age mental health”. Kate wondered if the irony was deliberate.

On Fallon's website Kate found film and video of bizarre experiments. Rats were remote controlled like toy cars. Most disturbing was video of a male chimpanzee implanted with a brain chip who would mount a female chimp at the touch of a remote switch. This could be repeated until both collapsed, or died. “Who needs Viagra?” Kate muttered.

Strangely, Fallon promoted his own controversy; Kate discovered a large segment on his website devoted to critical comments about him from the media. Scientific American, Psychology Today, The Lancet, were all condemning. She chuckled when Rolling Stone chimed; “Fallon is a triple threat; brilliant, weird, and crazy.”

Kate agreed. Who actively publishes negative comments about themselves? Someone very secure about who they are and what they can do.

In a final check, she ran Fallon's name and his company through two broad police data bases that would cross reference any criminal activity. It was a routine her father used on all names connected with a case, including victims, witnesses, and suspects. Occasionally, bits of odd data would turn up that could be used at some point—you just never knew. Her father called it looking for the “edge”.

Kate found a name; Gladys Pullman, a murder victim who had worked for MedTek. There was no further information. Because Kate was due at the brunch with Fallon, she would check this out later.

When Thomas and Kate arrived at the Four Seasons Hotel dining room she was surprised to find Doctor Fallon already there. It had been her experience that more prominent the person, the longer the wait.

Kate made her habitual mental report: late forties to mid fifties, brown eyes, hair expensively tinted to cover gray, height about five-five, very slight build. He seemed smaller than his celebrity image, and his face older than the website photos. No geeky clothing, he was tastefully tailored; the style was expensive old Savile Row. Despite his predictable arrogance, there was an unexpected charm as he dominated the conversation. He had not come for a conference, he was holding court.

Thomas listened to Fallon's small talk while they waited for their drinks. It was odd trying to relate this congenial, social Fallon with the one that he had spent hours on the phone discussing the diary. Now he was performing for them with practiced ease.

The drinks arrived, Chablis for Kate, beer for Thomas. Fallon raised his glass of mineral water in a toast. "To happier circumstances." Then, the charm vanished. "I have suffered two devastating losses. Denise Hollander, my assistant of 16 years, brutally murdered, is irreplaceable. The stolen Templar diary is priceless. I do not take loss graciously."

Kate responded. "Hopefully, the diary will soon be recovered which could lead to the killer."

"I'm confident it will. That's why I am offering five hundred thousand for information leading to the conviction of Denise's killer."

"That is very generous."

"A term rarely applied to me, Detective Flynn," He said curtly. "In a word, I am controversial." There was a trace of a smile. "Did Google mention that I married my step-mother the day after we took Daddy off life support?" He shrugged. "It didn't last. Passion is wrongly compared with fire; it is more like ice. When it's gone, everything begins to rot."

"Google didn't mention that."

Fallon turned to Thomas. "I fear I have shocked our monk."

"I doubt if you fear shocking anyone," Thomas smiled.

Fallon spoke to Kate as if sharing a confidence. "When Brother Thomas and I began our association I warned him that I am a militant atheist. I embrace every sin except alcohol, which irreparably damages the brain." He referred to her glass. "Those few ounces of wine will destroy thousands of brain cells. Will your next sip prevent an imaginative leap that might solve some complex homicide?"

She savored a deep swallow. "Nope. Didn't feel a thing."

He chuckled. "The miraculous brain," he reached in the bread basket and held up a roll. "There's a theory that ideas are *atomically* structured. The brain metabolizes food into thought. How many thoughts in a bite of bread? Imagine. We may owe  $E=MC^2$  to Einstein's bagel."

"'Einstein's Bagel'—sounds like a Sixties rock band." Kate gave them a coy look. "If this conversation gets any deeper I am going to cut class."

Thomas asked, "Doctor Fallon, are you also offering a reward for the diary?"

"No. I want no publicity about the diary. According to my gaggle of attorneys it could become critical evidence. We must put limitations on its use."

"What limitations?" Kate's voice edged.

"After you recover the diary it may not be duplicated in any way, not even for forensic tests. Not without a court order."

"I am not aware of any such law."

"It's being pushed through the California legislature this week." There was a cloying smile. "Power is also knowing where to spend the money."

Kate pressed. "A law is being passed about the diary?"

"Nothing so direct. The legislation pertains to evidence covered by unusual circumstance – like if a classified government document becomes evidence in a homicide. Its actual contents can't be revealed. This now will also include any material of rare historical value; like a work of art or document listed as a national treasure."

Her eyes sparked. "Dr. Fallon, I've dealt with classified data before as evidence in Federal cases. This is an unnecessary limitation."

Thomas added, "And I didn't know the diary is a national treasure."

"It is now. Only a few pages of the diary have been duplicated for translation. The three I sent you. Are they safe?"

Kate glared at Thomas; he hadn't told her. He avoided her look. "Yes, I have them."

Fallon, sensing the tension between them, played to it. "You see, Detective Flynn, our Thomas is more than a mere scholarly monk. He is also a man of notoriety and mystery."

"You are too kind," Thomas smiled dryly.

"Also, Detective, you should know that I am bringing in my own investigative team to find the killer."

"Whom you will then turn over to the police. Yes?" But her look said that she already knew the answer.

"That depends on how quickly they give me the diary."

Thomas countered. "You mean after you finish with them?"

"You are very perceptive."

Kate's tone sharpened. "Dr. Fallon that is a blatant threat."

"No, merely a goad for the police to catch the killer. Otherwise, when I get the diary, you will be stuck with an unsolved homicide. My attorneys assure me it would be difficult to prosecute me should I find the killer in a foreign country, and take steps to recover my property."

"You think that's where he'll be?" Thomas asked.

"It is where he will end up." The topic finished, the charm abruptly appeared. "Kate, do you like Mexican cuisine?"

She played along, "Mmmm. My favorite." Her oozing charm matched his.

"Will you join me for dinner? There's a chef in Cancun named Javier who is a genius with seafood. We'll jet back from Mexico tomorrow in time for you to go to work."

"Gee, love to, but don't have time. Now I have to catch the killer before you do."

On the mountain road back up to the monastery, there was little conversation; both were still absorbed in the Fallon meeting. Rounding a turn revealed a dazzling panorama of shimmering ocean. Kate pulled over. Below, the cobalt Pacific was patiently carving the bay a wave at a time.

“Should I have gone with Fallon to Cancun?”

“It depends upon what you're willing to do for a Mexican dinner.”

“Trade my virtue for tacos?” she chuckled.

They were again silent, absorbed in their own thoughts.

Thomas was still wrestling with the Fallon paradox. Why was a scientist, and militant atheist so obsessed with the Templars, a religious Order? He had hoped this meeting would clarify some questions but all he discovered was that Fallon had a clear agenda. Thomas was also annoyed by something unexpected: jealousy at the thought of Kate flying to Cancun with Fallon. Why did he care?

She drove into the monastery lot, parked, and killed the engine, but continued staring straight ahead. Her bantering mood disappeared as the anger she had suppressed since lunch finally spilled over. “When were you going to tell me about the duplicate pages of the diary?”

“Fallon swore me to secrecy. I had to respect that unless it became relevant to your case.”

She flared, “And just how in hell would you know when that was?” Her tone shifted. “Thomas, as I explained before, the diary is our case. But we don't actually have it. All we have is Fallon's word for it. Now I discover that you have three duplicate pages that proves it exists. And you were going to wait to tell me!”

“Kate, I'm sorry. That was stupid. I didn't understand.”

She read his complete innocence. “Okay. You were keeping your agreement. I get that. But this is a homicide. So, no more secrets.”

“No secrets.” He agreed. “Then, you need to understand about my past. I don't want you to hear it from me. Go to the Internet, check out my book, and follow wherever that leads. Afterward, I'll answer any questions. The book is Merlin: Legend, Wizard, Saint.”

When she drove away, the questions were already forming.

At exactly eight the next morning Kate arrived at the monastery. When she entered she heard the echo of monks chanting somewhere deep within its walls. Brother Barnabas, the monk assigned that day to greet visitors, was wearing the distinctive habit of the Order, a dark denim robe with a white chord tied at the waist. He seemed awkward talking with a woman—apparently, an occupational hazard. She asked to see Brother Thomas.

“Please wait here.” He disappeared down a chill corridor, the sound of his steps fading on the Spanish tile.

She absently wondered what would happen if she took off her blouse and ran topless through these sacred halls. That would require at least two stiff margaritas. Before she could enjoy the fantasy, Abbot Father Methodius appeared. He seemed to be in his late fifties with an oyster pallor contrasting his blue robe.

“You wanted to see Brother Thomas?”

Kate showed her badge. “Detective Flynn.”

“Oh. His police friend.” He became flustered.

“What is wrong?”

The Abbot looked away from her. “I don’t know exactly how to—”

“What is wrong?”

“Brother Thomas was abducted last night.”

Her gut wrenched. “Abducted?”

“This is so—”

“How the hell could he be abducted from a monastery?”

“Brother Barnabas was on night vigil. Around one thirty there was someone at the door. When he opened it, three men overpowered him. They drugged him with a needle. When all the Brothers were awakened, Brother Thomas was gone.”

“Did you call the police?”

“No. There was a phone call. A man said that if we called the police they would kill Brother Thomas.”

Kate thought of the assault on Thomas yesterday. “God DAMMIT!”

The words echoed in the monastery for the very first time.

The Abbot stammered. “Please, you can’t report this. Not until we have been contacted about a ransom.”

“Ransom? This is about that frigging diary and you know it!”

Before Methodius could answer, an elderly monk entered. He was frail, nearly skeletal and wore thick glasses. Instead of aged wrinkles, his skin was tightly drawn, sallow parchment so that his skull looked like an ancient artifact. There was a small bandage on the side of his head. Somehow he looked vaguely familiar.

“Father Abbot, have you heard anything more about Thomas?”

“Please calm yourself, Brother Simon, or you’ll be back in the hospital.” He introduced them and added, “Detective, you may also recognize him as Dr. Simon Springer, the famed astrophysicist.” He pronounced name and title as if it were one word.

“Cosmologist,” Brother Simon corrected.

Then Kate remembered pictures in the media, the physicist-monk lecturing eminent scientists, his monk’s robe an odd contrast in a sea of suits. She indicated his head bandage, “Were you hurt by the kidnappers?”

“No. Do you always jump to conclusions?”

The Abbot smoothly interrupted. “Brother Simon goes to the hospital regularly for dialysis. Last week he fell and cut his head.”

Kate, annoyed by Simon’s comment, pointedly handed her card to Methodius. “My phone numbers, in case you think of something.” She looked from one to the other. “Okay, help me. Since they got the diary when they killed Denise Hollander, why abduct Thomas?”

Simon’s look marked her as hopelessly dense. “Obviously, they need him to translate. Good Lord, you’re a detective, and didn’t see that?”



## CHAPTER THREE

Driving back to town, Kate was unconsciously speeding to match her racing thoughts. Brother Simon, the snotty little shit, was right. The kidnapppers— Denise’s killers needed Thomas to translate and she missed it. Jesus! What was she thinking? To fight rising panic, she forced herself to think like his abductors. So long as they needed him, he would stay alive. Surely, he would sense this and stall the translating.

But for how long? As soon as her department found out about the abduction, it instantly became a kidnap-hostage, which elevated everything to a military style operation. She could already hear the S.W.A.T. order to “lock and load”. The abductors, having committed at least one murder, might think they had little to lose. She recalled a similar scenario from the LAPD counter-terrorist lectures. The outcome was a disaster.

Yet, intuition told her to hold off, instinct over-riding logic. Minutes later, she felt calmer. She would delay informing the department for 48 hours and work around the clock to find Thomas. But if she were wrong:

Mother-of-God! Right now, she needed help.

Detective Sgt. Vicky Marroquin was forty-two, a spicy blend of her Black mother and Hispanic father. She was the first non-Anglo woman on the force to make homicide detective. Vicky and Kate were Santa Barbara natives; both had gone to UCLA on scholarship, though they had not known each other then and Vicky was ten years older. She didn’t finish, dropping out her Junior year to marry. Though Kate’s training and experience exceeded Vicky’s, they balanced each other. Opposites became friends. When they worked the good cop, bad cop; it was bad cop, worse cop. It just came naturally.

Sitting at Jake’s diner with Vicky, Kate explained the situation in quick broad strokes. The two of them were so in tune they sometimes finished each other’s sentences.

Vicky frowned. “Let’s see; we search for the diary; we look for the monk but we don’t tell Captain Starger. Great. Fooling him is gonna be shakier than a cheating husband’s alibi.” She laughed. “I’m in.”

“Thanks. In your place I would have said no.”

“I almost did. What’s next?”

“Witnesses. An abduction in the middle of the night and hardly any traffic in neighborhoods near the monastery. Somebody may have seen something. Pray for a roaming insomniac.”

“Hernandez in Traffic owes me. He’ll check the files. Nine hours gives them a hell of a start. Your monk could be in Canada, Mexico anywhere.”

“I’ll check private flights. Somebody on a gurney or with a team of body guards.”

Vicky’s vibes read that this was not an ordinary kidnapping. Kate, always the driven bulldog, seemed vaguely distracted. Knowing Kate; this was not Kate. Vicky said nothing.

Back at the office, Kate made a call to the Baltimore PD because Fallon’s headquarters was in Baltimore—a logical place to start. She was looking for information on Gladys Pullman, the murder victim who worked at MedTek. She finally tracked down the case lead detective, Dan Swartz. He was somewhat amused at her questions.

“I couldn’t find any information on her case,” Kate said.

“Not surprising. Fallon is a piece of work—one of him in your case is enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“We did a full routine investigation for the first 48, like always. Hit a dead end. That happens. You could smell ‘cold case’ from the beginning. Then Fallon did a number on the media and it died.”

“How did he do that?”

“Ever deal with a power player like Fallon? Money, contacts and everything else he needs for control. He managed to get the story buried. That’s it. There’s more in her case file than made the media—but the case is stone dead. You want a copy?”

“I’ll swap you my first born, if I ever have one.”

After hanging up, Kate opened Denise Hollander’s homicide file. It now contained her background report. She was 51, unmarried and had been Fallon’s “right arm”. Her job was her life. There was also a note on her family. She had lots of nieces and nephews, the adored maiden aunt. There is usually one in every family—like her own Aunt Brigid. For simply delivering the diary, Denise Hollander was brutally murdered and mutilated. Kate felt another tinge of rage.

From the file she pulled her notes on Thomas' interview, locked them in her briefcase, and put the folder back in the file. There would be no documentation on Thomas until she was ready.

But fear still nagged; how was Thomas taking it? He was physically strong and mentally tough; monks required intense self discipline. But his naiveté might make him easier to trick. Eventually, he would be forced to translate. Could he delay them without being beaten or tortured?

Thomas' first sensation beyond pain was smell: fried frijoles. A raging headache hammered as if his head was jammed in a vice. He realized he had been drugged, the fading effects still raggedly hanging on.

With eyes blindfolded, he lay on his back on a narrow bed. His wrists were cuffed to the metal headboard; it gave little when he pulled. The thin mattress reeked of old urine.

Fading in and out of his stupor, he was aware of men's voices speaking Spanish from behind a door. A radio played constantly; Salsa music, and Spanish talk radio. The constant rancid fried bean smell was stifling.

Mexico? Or hell?

Occasionally, when he could concentrate he prayed from habit, mostly Psalm fragments; "the Lord is thy keeper... he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler...thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day..."

Between prayers came a collage in slow motion, its images drug sharpened; the courier Hollander's mutilated body, Fallon's droning, droning obsessions, and especially the fascinating Kate Flynn. What was his impulsive attraction to her? Sexual repression from monastic celibacy? Exactly what Brother Simon would say.

Laughter from the next room jarred him back. Focus. Think. He was abducted for only one reason: to translate the diary. They blindfolded him so he could not identify them. Once it was removed for him to translate, he would see them: eventually they would have to kill him. Simple logic. Clear thinking. Obviously, he must delay, delay. He told himself that finally his mind was working, and then he drifted off in a blissful haze.

That night, in her apartment, Kate sat at the computer with Watson, her twenty six pound tomcat, cozily asleep in her lap. This had become so routine that whenever she used the computer at home she needed the comfort of Watson's furry warmth.

Before she went to the Internet, she gathered her thoughts trying to determine what she knew about Thomas. She had constantly made assessments of witnesses, suspects, and perps. Reading people was one of her strengths. Objectively, she could say that Thomas was attractive and highly intelligent. But there was something unusual about him, an unexpected naiveté. Yet instead of making him unsophisticated, it gave him a fearless vulnerability. There was an openness, and quiet confidence that he could handle whatever might happen. He appeared to be one of those people that what you saw was what you got.

She began searching the Internet and found Thomas' book, "*Merlin; Legend, Wizard, Saint.*" Fallon had not exaggerated Thomas' notorious background. She vaguely understood why Thomas wanted her to find out about him objectively, from different sources.

The book was highly controversial; history buffs loved it, academics attacked it. *Atlantic Monthly* did a detailed article on the ensuing scandal in which Thomas claimed to have discovered a previously unknown manuscript proving his Merlin theory.

The document was supposedly dated sixth century. After questions were raised by some academics, lab tests proved the parchment no earlier than the tenth. The work was traced to a notorious French master forger in the late 1700's.

When Thomas appeared before the university ethics committee, he was accused of covering up the forgery to sell his book. Just a few days after the hearing came personal tragedy. While Thomas was out of town at a conference, his wife Lois was killed in an automobile accident. Thomas's closest friend was driving the car. They were returning from a weekend at a mountain cabin. It was perfect tabloid fodder; wife of controversial author dies during shack-up with his best friend. The tabloid actually used the dated term "shack-up".

Then on another website Kate found a bizarre twist. It was a 180 spin, and a total surprise from the Thomas she knew.

An *Enquirer* stringer discovered that as an adolescent Thomas had been studied by the Rhine Institute, famous for research in the paranormal. The tabloids branded Thomas the "psychic scholar" which did not improve his image. At a second ethics hearing, the psychic issue was raised. Thomas refused to comment. Shortly afterward he resigned.

Kate was stunned. Thomas a psychic? She hadn't the slightest belief in them. Psychics had been called in to help on two of her LAPD homicides. They couldn't find their ass with a bloodhound and an anal compass.

She accepted that she may be biased but was certain that nothing about him was bogus. Still, she could imagine that his naiveté might make him easily deluded.

Fallon was right; Thomas was full of surprises.

She turned off the computer, poured a Stoli on ice and curled up with Watson on the sofa, drinking and thinking.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Templars and Gypsy girl had been traveling since daybreak. Though Ursus agreed to let the woman guide them, he kept a brusque silence. Sara was amused but dared not show it. Ursus was well named; he was prickly as a bear sow.

Brychan glanced at him. "Your mood is foul, Brother Ursus."

"It is the Gypsy's fault that we were robbed." Ursus spoke as if she were not there. "When we helped her, the robbers stole the chest. True?"

"How could we not help her?"

"If you have the sight, why didn't you foresee that the robbers would steal the chest?"

Sara, amazed, looked at Brychan. He had the sight? Fortune telling ran deep in Roma life. It was easy to fool the gullible Gadjay but there were also 'readers' who were truly gifted. Since the Church declared it witchcraft and heresy, why would God give the sight to a monk? Unless it was the Devil's gift.

After a moment, Brychan answered Ursus. "The sight has its own time. Like the wind, it touches and moves on." He added, "Besides, it is said that only a fool reads for himself."

"Then, what good is it?" Ursus spurred his horse and rode ahead to reconnoiter a copse of dense growth for possible ambush.

Sara gave Brychan a teasing look. "If you read fortunes, maybe you are part Roma."

He was amused. "I cannot read fortunes."

Sara watched Ursus disappear into the undergrowth. Although the two men hardly needed to speak to communicate, there was unease between them. Unlike some Templars who kept only the appearance of monastic life, both Brychan and Ursus seemed sincerely devout. Their differences did not lie there.

She finally asked. "You are an odd pairing. Are all Templars so matched?"

Brychan did not answer; it was impossible to explain in a few words. His thoughts were instantly drawn to that day just months before when a secret document from the Grand Master was smuggled from prison.

Deep in the Foret d' Orient, the fugitive Templars, about fifty knights and sergeants, were gathered at the appointed place. After the Order was destroyed by King Phillip, unlike many who fled to different countries, this small band stayed behind in France on direct orders from Master De Molay. They were instructed to hide in the forest and rejoin him when he was freed from prison by order of Pope Clement, which might happen at any time. They had no choice; they were acting under direct orders.

For seven years they had held together barely surviving. Living off the land, they were also helped by poachers, and peasants.

While King Phillip's soldiers regularly scoured the country for the fugitives, the patrols did not venture far in the forest. The Templars, after years of combat in the Holy Land, had perfected Saracen ambush tactics. To be surprised by them meant death, for they could take no prisoners.

For this special meeting the Templars came from separate camps in the forest. A few defiantly wore their white mantles with the Templar cross. All seemed like stone shadows in the heavy mist, the only light was a single torch held by a ragged sergeant. Friar Luke, still greatly revered, was wearing his Templar cleric's green robe, now much frayed and patched.

After calling for their attention, the Friar explained that separate messages had been smuggled from the Grand Master in prison. He opened the first parchment and translated its two brief sentences from Latin; "Brother Brychan is now a Zelote. He is to be paired with Brother Ursus."

No explanation was given.

There was astonished silence. Ursus glared fiercely at Friar Luke as if he had written it.

All eyes looked to Brychan who stared straight ahead and at no one. They all knew that though young he was the best blade among them, save for Ursus. But, with the exception of a few skirmishes with the King's patrols, he was unproven in combat.

Traditionally, Zelotes added to their ranks only experienced veterans. They were limited in number to less than a hundred. Yet, Brychan was to become a Zelote by special order of the Master. "Zelotes answer to the Master who answers to Pope who answers to God."

Resentment hung like stinging smoke. Many of them would have sacrificed all to be made a Zelote.

Brother Ursus' eyes burned rage. His last Zelote pairing was with Claude of Lorraine, whose legend nearly matched his own. When Brother Claude fell at Acre, he had been pierced with eleven Saracen arrows before his final breath.

Ursus glared at Brychan with sour contempt. "A Zelote is a proven warrior. You don't know enough to stay alive." He turned away in disgust.

In a quick move, Brychan's dagger touched Ursus' throat under the ear. Ursus slowly turned into the point.

In warning, Brychan pressed the blade, drawing a tiny drop of blood. He nodded to the letter. "I am now a Zelote by order of the Master. You will obey it or be defrocked. The rule for disobedience."

The men watching were mute as mice. No one had ever pulled blade against Brother Ursus and lived. Worse, Brychan had drawn blood; a scratch the same as a gash.

All were witnessing the unthinkable; two Templar knights about to kill each other in the presence of brothers. Since their founding in over two centuries, this had never happened.

Brychan and Ursus stood frozen like pointer and hare. Even with his throat cut, Ursus would slay the young knight before dying. Brychan, for his part, faced a challenge that ended here or tainted all his days.

Brychan slowly raised his right hand palm outward, waiting. If Ursus did the same and their hands interlocked, it would be the Zelote sign that they were paired.

Their eyes were unwavering as palms touched, fingers locked into a hard double fist, the *iunctus manibus*. It was a silent vow cursed by rage. From that moment, no matter their personal feelings, they were sealed 'til death as paired Zelotes.

“Done.” Friar Luke pronounced and on their locked hands made the sign of the cross. Then he handed the second document to Brychan. “Read it but tell no one except Brother Ursus.”

The Latin was written in a scribe’s precise hand. Brychan read silently then nodded that he understood.

Friar Luke whispered. “The chest is at Holy Cross Cistercian convent.” He took the document and held it to the sergeant’s torch. It flared curling to instant ash.

“When?” Brychan asked.

“Tonight.”

Brychan looked at Ursus whose eyes were now ice. Five years before, Ursus had been ordered by the Grand Master to kill Brychan if a certain prophecy he had dreamed was eventually declared false. Fortunately, for him the prophecy was true. Now, in a fatal irony, they were again bound together on a mission that surely must end in death.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate was early at her desk after a sleepless night that a second Stoli didn’t remedy. She was sifting through traffic reports looking for a witness. The phone rang.

“Detective Flynn? Fallon. I can’t reach our monk.”

She had conveniently forgotten to tell Fallon. “Doctor Fallon, Brother Thomas is missing.”

“What do you mean ‘missing’?”

“He was abducted from the monastery.”

“What! When?”

“Night before last.”

“Why wasn’t I told?”



"We've been rather busy here." She couldn't tell him that the police were not informed. Fallon would insist on calling in SWAT, the K-9 Corps and the Navy SEALs.

"Busy? That's *not* acceptable." Fallon snapped. "Let's be very clear, Detective. I expect to be kept informed of *every* detail in this case."

Kate bristled. "Dr Fallon, who was Gladys Pullman? She worked for you. Baltimore police have an open homicide case on her."

There was a long silence. When he finally spoke he was strangely subdued.

"I knew *you'd* find out."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

"Because it was too painful to go into again."

"I am afraid we have to."

There was another uncomfortable pause while he was deciding.

"Alright, Detective. I'll discuss it with you just once. But if you mention it again, I will make this case a nightmare for you. You need me."

"You're calling the shots, Doctor. Let's talk."

His tone became vulnerable which was unnatural for him. "As you may imagine, I have few friends. My work and the associates that I trust are my life. Both Denise Hollander and Gladys Pullman were closest to me. Dr. Pullman was my top research programmer. One night after working late at the lab she disappeared.

Kate felt a tingle. "Disappeared, how?"

"She was abducted going to her car. She was never found."

"Any ransom demand?"

"No. About a week later some of her clothing was discovered in the woods. It was covered in blood. DNA confirmed it was Doctor Pullman's. There were clear signs of torture."

"What was the motive?"

“Business. Industrial espionage. A week later some of our sensitive classified research appeared in the media. Police upgraded Pullman’s case to suspected homicide.”

“Are you guessing at the motive?”

“I’ve gone beyond that. I’ve considered that some enemy was trying to get at me. Two women, my closest associates, both murdered? But objectively, both were work related. Now you see why I put up the money to get the killer and will stop at nothing. I certainly don’t intend to wait on the bumbling police.”

“Doctor Fallon—” Kate was forming another question.

“I repeat; I expect to be kept *fully* informed.” Fallon hung up.

Kate scribbled a note. She leaned back, looking at what she had just written; “*What happened before?*” Denise Hollander, the courier, was murdered for the diary; but Doctor Pullman obviously was not. Something ugly was going on a year *before* the diary and Fallon was in the middle of it. Well, son-of-a-bitch.

Fallon moved quickly through his office suite and into his private elevator. He keyed a code and descended to the maximum-secure bottom level. The elevator opened into a glaring white corridor. There was a double door marked LAB 5; in front, a state-of-the-art security terminal. Fallon placed his hand on a disk that read his palm and digit prints. This activated an identifying retinal scan; he said his name for voice print ID.

The double doors opened to an explosion of sound, a celebration in high gear. A dozen men and women in white lab coats were drinking champagne, voices shrill with excitement. No one noticed Fallon.

His eyes searched a wall of oversized screens glowing with data. Numbers and graphs danced an analysis of physiological readings. In the center of the room a large mainframe computer was feeding the monitors. Foot high letters in stainless steel read “GOLEM”.

Facing GOLEM in a chair on a raised dais, a pale man sat with his legs stretched out. His name was Herbert Longrieve, late fifties, gaunt and lanky. The blue of his luminous eyes contrasted with putty toned skin. On his shaved head was a lacework of surgical stitching. The surrounding monitors were readings of his vital signs and one entire wall was devoted to multiple analysis of his brain scans. No wiring connected him to the computer.

Nearby, two men, ignoring the celebration, were discussing sheets of printouts. Both noticed Fallon at the same moment.

“Dr. Fallon, we tried to call you!” Dr. Meier said. “At zero nine twenty three—”

“Interface?”

“Total interface,” Dr. Lizerand beamed. He handed Fallon two printouts.

“Yes! By God!” Fallon laughed in his peculiar high tenor.

“Look at that!” Lizerand pointed at the monitors. “Two way feedback. Impossible to tell the readouts apart. GOLEM can even make Herb piss on cue!”

Fallon added, “And Herb can give GOLEM his neurosis.”

Both doctors laughed dutifully. Fallon broke away and moved through the white-coated celebrants who parted like sea foam.

Longrieve saw him and smiled. Fallon took his hand, squeezing it. “Magnificent, Herb. No one else could have done it.”

“Thank you, Dr. Fallon.” His voice seemed weaker than Fallon remembered a few days ago. He looked to see Doctor Meier signaling to him. Fallon excused himself and followed the doctors into an observation booth and closed the door. From here they had full view of the laboratory.

“Dr. Fallon,” Meier began cautiously, “this breakthrough must be made public.”

“Immediately.” Lizerand agreed. “And reported the way we decide. If it leaks out, we’ll face impossible damage control.”

“No.”

“But the criticism will be—”

“Listen to me carefully.” Fallon’s tone dropped for emphasis. “Secrecy is even more critical. Now the real work begins.”

The doctors looked at each other.

“We have interface, goddammit!” Fallon took a calming breath. “Think, gentlemen. Over three years we’ve put implants in how many?”

“Twelve.” Meier answered.

“Twelve Federal prisoners and that’s illegal. Now you want to tell the media about this? Stick to what you know!”

Meier blanched, Lizerand flushed, both nodded agreement.

“There is something else.” Lizerand added. “Longrieve’s physical condition is deteriorating. Extreme fatigue. He is literally being drained by GOLEM.”

“That is expected. He will recover. Herb knew this from the beginning.”

“No. It’s worse than we thought.” Meier added. “He may not survive more experiments without rest. At least a week. His lab reports—”

“No! Interface, 24/7! We can’t risk breaking continuity.”

“He is no good to you dead.” Dr. Lizerand persisted. “Longrieve is unique. You cannot just start over with somebody else.”

“That is why you will keep him alive. If he goes comatose, keep his brain alive!”

He angrily turned and walked out.

Thomas was awakened by the sound of a car outside. He heard the door open and recognized the voices. The familiar footsteps of his jailers came into the room. Lighter, brisk steps followed, possibly a woman.

His hands were un-cuffed so that he could sit on the side of the bed and the blindfold was removed.

Thomas blinked painfully at the brightness. It was his first look at his captors; two hard edged Hispanics. He knew there was also a third man he heard giving orders, but who always stayed in the next room.

There was a woman holding a black briefcase. She nodded for the two to leave, and they closed the door. She lit a brown cigarette. “I’m Nola.”

When he did not respond, she set the briefcase on the table, and opened it. She took out a package sealed in two clear plastic envelopes. She removed a book bound in dark scarred leather, and studded with bronze brads worn smooth. She presented it: “The Templar Diary.”

He looked at her for a long moment, determined to appear casual, then took it. He was surprised at its weight; the leather was covering wood, probably oak rather than the more usual cypress, which floated if it fell into water. He opened it with expert care so as to prevent the full weight of the pages from resting on the spine which can damage older volumes. Unconsciously he held his breath. He was touching seven centuries of history and legend—if it was authentic.

She waited until he looked up at her then she smiled. “Translate the diary, or they will kill you.”

“You’ll kill me anyway after I finish. Like the courier.”

“When that happened, I was a continent away, and can prove it.” She shrugged, “Which still doesn’t mean they won’t kill you.”

“Has it occurred to you to simply hire a translator? Scotland and Ireland are ass-deep in Celtic scholars.”

“Not with your background; Celtic studies and the Templars.” Nola reached in the briefcase and held up his Merlin book. “You think I got your name out of the Yellow Pages?”

When he didn’t answer she gave a smug smile. “You expect me to believe that you would leave translating to someone else? That diary is the last link to the Templars. My devout monk, you’d kill *me* to translate it.”