

INFERNO

The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.

FACT:

All artwork, literature, science, and historical references in this novel are real.

'The Consortium' is a private organization with offices in seven countries. Its name has been changed for considerations of security and privacy.

Inferno is the underworld as described in Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which portrays hell as an elaborately structured realm populated by entities known as 'shades' – bodiless souls trapped between life and death.

Prologue

I am the Shade.

Through the dole` t city, I flee.

Through the eter` al woe, I take flight.

Along the banks of the river Arno, I scramble, breathless . . . turning left onto Via dei Castellani, making my way northward, huddling in the shadows of the Uffizi.

And still they pursue me.

Their footsteps grow louder now as they hunt with relentless determination.

For years they have pursued me. Their persistence has kept me underground . . . forced me to live in purgatory . . . laboring beneath the earth like a chthonic monster.

I am the Shade.

Here aboveground, I raise my eyes to the north, but I am unable to find a direct path to salvation . . . for the Apennine Mountains are blotting out the first light of dawn.

I pass behind the palazzo with its crenellated tower and one-handed clock . . . snaking through the early-morning vendors in Piazza di San Firenze with their hoarse voices smelling of *lampredotto* and roasted olives. Crossing before the Bargello, I cut west toward the spire of the Badia and come up hard against the iron gate at the base of the stairs.

Here all hesitatio` must be left behi`d.

I turn the handle and step into the passage from which I know there will be no return. I urge my leaden legs up the narrow staircase . . . spiraling skyward on soft marble treads, pitted and worn.

The voices echo from below. Beseeching.

They are behind me, unyielding, closing in.

They do `ot u`dersta`d what is comi`g . . . `or what I have do`e for them!

U`grateful la`d!

As I climb, the visions come hard . . . the lustful bodies writhing in fiery rain, the gluttonous souls floating in excrement, the treacherous villains frozen in Satan's icy grasp.

I climb the final stairs and arrive at the top, staggering near dead into the damp morning air. I rush to the head-high wall, peering through the slits. Far below is the blessed city that I have made my sanctuary from those who exiled me.

The voices call out, arriving close behind me. 'What you've done is madness!'

Mad`ess breeds mad`ess.

'For the love of God,' they shout, 'tell us where you've hidden it!'

For precisely the love of God, I will `ot.

I stand now, cornered, my back to the cold stone. They stare deep into my clear green eyes, and their expressions darken, no longer cajoling, but threatening. 'You know we have our methods. We can force you to tell us where it is.'

For that reaso`, I have climbed halfway to heave`.

Without warning, I turn and reach up, curling my fingers on to the high ledge, pulling myself up, scrambling on to my knees, then standing . . .

unsteady at the precipice. *Guide me, dear Virgil, across the void.*

They rush forward in disbelief, wanting to grab at my feet, but fearing they will upset my balance and knock me off. They beg now, in quiet desperation, but I have turned my back. *I know what I must do.*

Beneath me, dizzyingly far beneath me, the red tile roofs spread out like a sea of fire on the countryside, illuminating the fair land upon which giants once roamed . . . Giotto, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Botticelli.

I inch my toes to the edge.

'Come down!' they shout. 'It's not too late!'

O, willful ignorant! Do you not see the future? Do you not grasp the splendor of my creation? The necessity?

I will gladly make this ultimate sacrifice . . . and with it I will extinguish your final hope of finding what you seek.

You will never locate it in time.

Hundreds of feet below, the cobblestone piazza beckons like a tranquil oasis. How I long for more time . . . but time is the one commodity even my vast fortunes cannot afford.

In these final seconds, I gaze down at the piazza, and I behold a sight that startles me.

I see your face.

You are gazing up at me from the shadows. Your eyes are mournful, and yet in them I sense a veneration for what I have accomplished. You understand I have no choice. For the love of Mankind, I must protect my masterpiece.

It grows ever known . . . waiting . . . simmering beneath the bloodred waters of the lagoon that reflects the stars.

And so, I lift my eyes from yours and I contemplate

the horizon. High above this burdened world, I make my final supplication.

Dearest God, I pray the world remembers my `ame `ot as a mo`strous si``er, but as the glorious savior you k`ow I truly am. I pray Ma`ki`d will u`dersta`d the gift I leave behi`d.

My gift is the future.

My gift is salvatio`.

My gift is I`fer`o.

With that, I whisper my amen . . . and take my final step, into the abyss.

1

The memories materialized slowly . . . like bubbles surfacing from the darkness of a bottomless well.

A veiled woma` .

Robert Langdon gazed at her across a river whose churning waters ran red with blood. On the far bank, the woman stood facing him, motionless, solemn, her face hidden by a shroud. In her hand she gripped a blue *tai` ia* cloth, which she now raised in honor of the sea of corpses at her feet. The smell of death hung everywhere.

Seek, the woman whispered. A` d ye shall fi` d.

Langdon heard the words as if she had spoken them inside his head. 'Who are you?' he called out, but his voice made no sound.

Time grows short, she whispered. Seek a` d fi` d.

Langdon took a step toward the river, but he could see the waters were bloodred and too deep to traverse. When Langdon raised his eyes again to the veiled woman, the bodies at her feet had multiplied. There were hundreds of them now, maybe thousands, some still alive, writhing in agony, dying unthinkable deaths . . . consumed by fire, buried in feces, devouring one another. He could hear the mournful cries of human suffering echoing across the water.

The woman moved toward him, holding out her slender hands, as if beckoning for help.

'Who are you?!' Langdon again shouted.

In response, the woman reached up and slowly lifted the veil from her face. She was strikingly beautiful, and yet older than Langdon had imagined – in her sixties perhaps, stately and strong, like a timeless statue. She had a sternly set jaw, deep soulful eyes, and long, silver-gray hair that cascaded over her shoulders in ringlets. An amulet of lapis lazuli hung around her neck – a single snake coiled around a staff.

Langdon sensed he knew her . . . trusted her. *But how? Why?*

She pointed now to a writhing pair of legs, which protruded upside down from the earth, apparently belonging to some poor soul who had been buried headfirst to his waist. The man's pale thigh bore a single letter – written in mud – *R*.

R? Langdon thought, uncertain. *As i` . . . Robert? 'Is that . . . me?'*

The woman's face revealed nothing. *Seek a`d fi`d,* she repeated.

Without warning, she began radiating a white light . . . brighter and brighter. Her entire body started vibrating intensely, and then, in a rush of thunder, she exploded into a thousand splintering shards of light.

Langdon bolted awake, shouting.

The room was bright. He was alone. The sharp smell of medicinal alcohol hung in the air, and somewhere a machine pinged in quiet rhythm with his heart. Langdon tried to move his right arm, but a sharp pain restrained him. He looked down and saw an IV tugging at the skin of his forearm.

His pulse quickened, and the machines kept pace, pinging more rapidly.

Where am I? What happened?

The back of Langdon's head throbbed, a gnawing pain. Gingerly, he reached up with his free arm and touched his scalp, trying to locate the source of his headache. Beneath his matted hair, he found the hard nubs of a dozen or so stitches caked with dried blood.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember an accident. Nothing. A total blank.

Think.

Only darkness.

A man in scrubs hurried in, apparently alerted by Langdon's racing heart monitor. He had a shaggy beard, bushy mustache, and gentle eyes that radiated a thoughtful calm beneath his overgrown eyebrows.

'What . . . happened?' Langdon managed. 'Did I have an accident?'

The bearded man put a finger to his lips and then rushed out, calling for someone down the hall.

Langdon turned his head, but the movement sent a spike of pain radiating through his skull. He took deep breaths and let the pain pass. Then, very gently and methodically, he surveyed his sterile surroundings.

The hospital room had a single bed. No flowers. No cards. Langdon saw his clothes on a nearby counter, folded inside a clear plastic bag. They were covered with blood.

My God. It must have been bad.

Now Langdon rotated his head very slowly toward the window beside his bed. It was dark outside. Night. All Langdon could see in the glass was his own reflection – an ashen stranger, pale and weary,

attached to tubes and wires, surrounded by medical equipment.

Voices approached in the hall, and Langdon turned his gaze back toward the room. The doctor returned, now accompanied by a woman.

She appeared to be in her early thirties. She wore blue scrubs and had tied her blond hair back in a thick ponytail that swung behind her as she walked.

'I'm Dr. Sienna Brooks,' she said, giving Langdon a smile as she entered. 'I'll be working with Dr. Marconi tonight.'

Langdon nodded weakly.

Tall and lissome, Dr. Brooks moved with the assertive gait of an athlete. Even in shapeless scrubs, she had a willowy elegance about her. Despite the absence of any makeup that Langdon could see, her complexion appeared unusually smooth, the only blemish a tiny beauty mark just above her lips. Her eyes, though a gentle brown, seemed unusually penetrating, as if they had witnessed a profundity of experience rarely encountered by a person her age.

'Dr. Marconi doesn't speak much English,' she said, sitting down beside him, 'and he asked me to fill out your admittance form.' She gave him another smile.

'Thanks,' Langdon croaked.

'Okay,' she began, her tone businesslike. 'What is your name?'

It took him a moment. 'Robert . . . Langdon.'

She shone a penlight in Langdon's eyes. 'Occupation?'

This information surfaced even more slowly. 'Professor. Art history . . . and symbology. Harvard University.'

Dr. Brooks lowered the light, looking startled. The

doctor with the bushy eyebrows looked equally surprised.

'You're . . . an American?'

Langdon gave her a confused look.

'It's just . . . ' She hesitated. 'You had no identification when you arrived tonight. You were wearing Harris Tweed and Somerset loafers, so we guessed British.'

'I'm American,' Langdon assured her, too exhausted to explain his preference for well-tailored clothing.

'Any pain?'

'My head,' Langdon replied, his throbbing skull only made worse by the bright penlight. Thankfully, she now pocketed it, taking Langdon's wrist and checking his pulse.

'You woke up shouting,' the woman said. 'Do you remember why?'

Langdon flashed again on the strange vision of the veiled woman surrounded by writhing bodies. *Seek a`d ye shall fi`d.* 'I was having a nightmare.'

'About?'

Langdon told her.

Dr. Brooks's expression remained neutral as she made notes on a clipboard. 'Any idea what might have sparked such a frightening vision?'

Langdon probed his memory and then shook his head, which pounded in protest.

'Okay, Mr. Langdon,' she said, still writing, 'a couple of routine questions for you. What day of the week is it?'

Langdon thought for a moment. 'It's Saturday. I remember earlier today walking across campus . . . going to an afternoon lecture series, and then . . . that's pretty much the last thing I remember. Did I fall?'

'We'll get to that. Do you know where you are?'

Langdon took his best guess. 'Massachusetts General Hospital?'

Dr. Brooks made another note. 'And is there someone we should call for you? Wife? Children?'

'Nobody,' Langdon replied instinctively. He had always enjoyed the solitude and independence provided him by his chosen life of bachelorhood, although he had to admit, in his current situation, he'd prefer to have a familiar face at his side. 'There are some colleagues I could call, but I'm fine.'

Dr. Brooks finished writing, and the older doctor approached. Smoothing back his bushy eyebrows, he produced a small voice recorder from his pocket and showed it to Dr. Brooks. She nodded in understanding and turned back to her patient.

'Mr. Langdon, when you arrived tonight, you were mumbling something over and over.' She glanced at Dr. Marconi, who held up the digital recorder and pressed a button.

A recording began to play, and Langdon heard his own groggy voice, repeatedly muttering the same phrase: '*Ve . . . sorry. Ve . . . sorry.*'

'It sounds to me,' the woman said, 'like you're saying, "Very sorry. Very sorry."'

Langdon agreed, and yet he had no recollection of it.

Dr. Brooks fixed him with a disquietingly intense stare. 'Do you have any idea why you'd be saying this? Are you sorry about something?'

As Langdon probed the dark recesses of his memory, he again saw the veiled woman. She was standing on the banks of a bloodred river surrounded by bodies. The stench of death returned.

Langdon was overcome by a sudden, instinctive

sense of danger . . . not just for himself . . . but for everyone. The pinging of his heart monitor accelerated rapidly. His muscles tightened, and he tried to sit up.

Dr. Brooks quickly placed a firm hand on Langdon's sternum, forcing him back down. She shot a glance at the bearded doctor, who walked over to a nearby counter and began preparing something.

Dr. Brooks hovered over Langdon, whispering now. 'Mr. Langdon, anxiety is common with brain injuries, but you need to keep your pulse rate down. No movement. No excitement. Just lie still and rest. You'll be okay. Your memory will come back slowly.'

The doctor returned now with a syringe, which he handed to Dr. Brooks. She injected its contents into Langdon's IV.

'Just a mild sedative to calm you down,' she explained, 'and also to help with the pain.' She stood to go. 'You'll be fine, Mr. Langdon. Just sleep. If you need anything, press the button on your bedside.'

She turned out the light and departed with the bearded doctor.

In the darkness, Langdon felt the drugs washing through his system almost instantly, dragging his body back down into that deep well from which he had emerged. He fought the feeling, forcing his eyes open in the darkness of his room. He tried to sit up, but his body felt like cement.

As Langdon shifted, he found himself again facing the window. The lights were out, and in the dark glass, his own reflection had disappeared, replaced by an illuminated skyline in the distance.

Amid a contour of spires and domes, a single regal facade dominated Langdon's field of view. The building was an imposing stone fortress with a notched

parapet and a three-hundred-foot tower that swelled near the top, bulging outward into a massive machicolated battlement.

Langdon sat bolt upright in bed, pain exploding in his head. He fought off the searing throb and fixed his gaze on the tower.

Langdon knew the medieval structure well. It was unique in the world.

Unfortunately, it was also located four thousand miles from Massachusetts.

Outside his window, hidden in the shadows of the Via Torregalli, a powerfully built woman effortlessly unstraddled her BMW motorcycle and advanced with the intensity of a panther stalking its prey. Her gaze was sharp. Her close-cropped hair – styled into spikes – stood out against the upturned collar of her black leather riding suit. She checked her silenced weapon, and stared up at the window where Robert Langdon's light had just gone out.

Earlier tonight her original mission had gone horribly awry.

The coo of a si`gle dove had cha`ged everythi`g.

Now she had come to make it right.

2

I'm i` Flore`ce!?

Robert Langdon's head throbbed. He was now seated upright in his hospital bed, repeatedly jamming his finger into the call button. Despite

the sedatives in his system, his heart was racing.

Dr. Brooks hurried back in, her ponytail bobbing. 'Are you okay?'

Langdon shook his head in bewilderment. 'I'm in . . . Italy!?'

'Good,' she said. 'You're remembering.'

'No!' Langdon pointed out the window at the commanding edifice in the distance. 'I recognize the Palazzo Vecchio.'

Dr. Brooks flicked the lights back on, and the Florence skyline disappeared. She came to his bedside, whispering calmly. 'Mr. Langdon, there's no need to worry. You're suffering from mild amnesia, but Dr. Marconi confirmed that your brain function is fine.'

The bearded doctor rushed in as well, apparently hearing the call button. He checked Langdon's heart monitor as the young doctor spoke to him in rapid, fluent Italian – something about how Langdon was '*agitato*' to learn he was in Italy.

Agitated? Langdon thought angrily. *More like stupefied!* The adrenaline surging through his system was now doing battle with the sedatives. 'What happened to me?' he demanded. 'What day is it?'

'Everything is fine,' she said. 'It's early morning. Monday, March eighteenth.'

Mo`day. Langdon forced his aching mind to reel back to the last images he could recall – cold and dark – walking alone across the Harvard campus to a Saturday-night lecture series. *That was two days ago?!* A sharper panic now gripped him as he tried to recall anything at all from the lecture or afterward. *Nothi`g.* The ping of his heart monitor accelerated.

The older doctor scratched at his beard and

continued adjusting equipment while Dr. Brooks sat again beside Langdon.

'You're going to be okay,' she reassured him, speaking gently. 'We've diagnosed you with retrograde amnesia, which is very common in head trauma. Your memories of the past few days may be muddled or missing, but you should suffer no permanent damage.' She paused. 'Do you remember my first name? I told you when I walked in.'

Langdon thought a moment. 'Sienna.' *Dr. Sie``a Brooks.*

She smiled. 'See? You're already forming new memories.'

The pain in Langdon's head was almost unbearable, and his near-field vision remained blurry. 'What . . . happened? How did I get here?'

'I think you should rest, and maybe—'

'How did I get here?!' he demanded, his heart monitor accelerating further.

'Okay, just breathe easy,' Dr. Brooks said, exchanging a nervous look with her colleague. 'I'll tell you.' Her voice turned markedly more serious. 'Mr. Langdon, three hours ago, you staggered into our emergency room, bleeding from a head wound, and you immediately collapsed. Nobody had any idea who you were or how you got here. You were mumbling in English, so Dr. Marconi asked me to assist. I'm on sabbatical here from the U.K.'

Langdon felt like he had awoken inside a Max Ernst painting. *What the hell am I doi`g i` Italy?* Normally Langdon came here every other June for an art conference, but this was March.

The sedatives pulled harder at him now, and he felt as if earth's gravity were growing stronger by the

second, trying to drag him down through his mattress. Langdon fought it, hoisting his head, trying to stay alert.

Dr. Brooks leaned over him, hovering like an angel. 'Please, Mr. Langdon,' she whispered. 'Head trauma is delicate in the first twenty-four hours. You need to rest, or you could do serious damage.'

A voice crackled suddenly on the room's intercom. 'Dr. Marco`i?'

The bearded doctor touched a button on the wall and replied, 'Si?'

The voice on the intercom spoke in rapid Italian. Langdon didn't catch what it said, but he did catch the two doctors exchanging a look of surprise. *Or is it alarm?*

'Mome`to,' Marconi replied, ending the conversation.

'What's going on?' Langdon asked.

Dr. Brooks's eyes seemed to narrow a bit. 'That was the ICU receptionist. Someone's here to visit you.'

A ray of hope cut through Langdon's grogginess. 'That's good news! Maybe this person knows what happened to me.'

She looked uncertain. 'It's just odd that someone's here. We didn't have your name, and you're not even registered in the system yet.'

Langdon battled the sedatives and awkwardly hoisted himself upright in his bed. 'If someone knows I'm here, that person must know what happened!'

Dr. Brooks glanced at Dr. Marconi, who immediately shook his head and tapped his watch. She turned back to Langdon.

'This is the ICU,' she explained. 'Nobody is allowed in until nine A.M. at the earliest. In a moment Dr.

Marconi will go out and see who the visitor is and what he or she wants.'

'What about what *I* want?' Langdon demanded.

Dr. Brooks smiled patiently and lowered her voice, leaning closer. 'Mr. Langdon, there are some things you don't know about last night . . . about what happened to you. And before you speak to anyone, I think it's only fair that you have all the facts. Unfortunately, I don't think you're strong enough yet to—'

'What facts!?' Langdon demanded, struggling to prop himself higher. The IV in his arm pinched, and his body felt like it weighed several hundred pounds. 'All I know is I'm in a Florence hospital and I arrived repeating the words "very sorry . . ."'

A frightening thought now occurred to him.

'Was I responsible for a car accident?' Langdon asked. 'Did I hurt someone?!

'No, no,' she said. 'I don't believe so.'

'Then *what?*' Langdon insisted, eyeing both doctors furiously. 'I have a right to know what's going on!'

There was a long silence, and Dr. Marconi finally gave his attractive young colleague a reluctant nod. Dr. Brooks exhaled and moved closer to his bedside. 'Okay, let me tell you what I know . . . and you'll listen calmly, agreed?'

Langdon nodded, the head movement sending a jolt of pain radiating through his skull. He ignored it, eager for answers.

'The first thing is this . . . Your head wound was not caused by an accident.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

'Not really. Your wound, in fact, was caused by a bullet.'

Langdon's heart monitor pinged faster. 'I beg your pardon!?'

Dr. Brooks spoke steadily but quickly. 'A bullet grazed the top of your skull and most likely gave you a concussion. You're very lucky to be alive. An inch lower, and . . .' She shook her head.

Langdon stared at her in disbelief. *Someone shot me?*

Angry voices erupted in the hall as an argument broke out. It sounded as if whoever had arrived to visit Langdon did not want to wait. Almost immediately, Langdon heard a heavy door at the far end of the hallway burst open. He watched until he saw a figure approaching down the corridor.

The woman was dressed entirely in black leather. She was toned and strong with dark, spiked hair. She moved effortlessly, as if her feet weren't touching the ground, and she was headed directly for Langdon's room.

Without hesitation, Dr. Marconi stepped into the open doorway to block the visitor's passage. '*Ferma!*' the man commanded, holding out his palm like a policeman.

The stranger, without breaking stride, produced a silenced handgun. She aimed directly at Dr. Marconi's chest and fired.

There was a staccato hiss.

Langdon watched in horror as Dr. Marconi staggered backward into the room, falling to the floor, clutching his chest, his white lab coat drenched in blood.

3

Five miles off the coast of Italy, the 237-foot luxury yacht *The Mendacium* motored through the predawn mist that rose from the gently rolling swells of the Adriatic. The ship's stealth-profile hull was painted gunmetal gray, giving it the distinctly unwelcoming aura of a military vessel.

With a price tag of over 300 million U.S. dollars, the craft boasted all the usual amenities – spa, pool, cinema, personal submarine, and helicopter pad. The ship's creature comforts, however, were of little interest to its owner, who had taken delivery of the yacht five years ago and immediately gutted most of these spaces to install a lead-lined, military-grade, electronic command center.

Fed by three dedicated satellite links and a redundant array of terrestrial relay stations, the control room on *The Mendacium* had a staff of nearly two dozen – technicians, analysts, operation coordinators – who lived on board and remained in constant contact with the organization's various land-based operation centers.

The ship's onboard security included a small unit of military-trained soldiers, two missile-detection systems, and an arsenal of the latest weapons available. Other support staff – cooks, cleaning, and service – pushed the total number on board to more than forty. *The Mendacium* was, in effect, the portable office building from which the owner ran his empire.

Known to his employees only as 'the provost,' he was a tiny, stunted man with tanned skin and deep-set

eyes. His unimposing physique and direct manner seemed well suited to one who had made a vast fortune providing a private menu of covert services along the shadowy fringes of society.

He had been called many things – a soulless mercenary, a facilitator of sin, the devil’s enabler – but he was none of these. The provost simply provided his clients with the opportunity to pursue their ambitions and desires without consequence; that mankind was sinful in nature was not his problem.

Despite his detractors and their ethical objections, the provost’s moral compass was a fixed star. He had built his reputation – and the Consortium itself – on two golden rules.

Never make a promise you cannot keep.

And never lie to a client.

Ever.

In his professional career, the provost had never broken a promise or reneged on a deal. His word was bankable – an absolute guarantee – and while there were certainly contracts he regretted having made, backing out of them was never an option.

This morning, as he stepped on to the private balcony of his yacht’s stateroom, the provost looked across the churning sea and tried to fend off the disquiet that had settled in his gut.

The decisions of our past are the architects of our present.

The decisions of the provost’s past had put him in a position to negotiate almost any minefield and always come out on top. Today, however, as he gazed out the window at the distant lights of the Italian mainland, he felt uncharacteristically on edge.

One year ago, on this very yacht, he had made a decision whose ramifications now threatened to

unravel everything he had built. *I agreed to provide services to the wrong man.* There had been no way the provost could have known at the time, and yet now the miscalculation had brought a tempest of unforeseen challenges, forcing him to send some of his best agents into the field with orders to do 'whatever it took' to keep his listing ship from capsizing.

At the moment the provost was waiting to hear from one field agent in particular.

Vayentha, he thought, picturing the sinewy, spike-haired specialist. *Vayentha*, who had served him perfectly until this mission, had made a mistake last night that had dire consequences. The last six hours had been a scramble, a desperate attempt to regain control of the situation.

Vayentha claimed her error was the result of simple bad luck – the untimely coo of a dove.

The provost, however, did not believe in luck. Everything he did was orchestrated to eradicate randomness and remove chance. Control was the provost's expertise – foreseeing every possibility, anticipating every response, and molding reality toward the desired outcome. He had an immaculate track record of success and secrecy, and with it came a staggering clientele – billionaires, politicians, sheikhs, and even entire governments.

To the east, the first faint light of morning had begun to consume the lowest stars on the horizon. On the deck the provost stood and patiently awaited word from *Vayentha* that her mission had gone exactly as planned.

4

For an instant, Langdon felt as if time had stopped.

Dr. Marconi lay motionless on the floor, blood gushing from his chest. Fighting the sedatives in his system, Langdon raised his eyes to the spike-haired assassin, who was still striding down the hall, covering the last few yards toward his open door. As she neared the threshold, she looked toward Langdon and instantly swung her weapon in his direction . . . aiming at his head.

I'm going to die, Langdon realized. *Here and now.*

The bang was deafening in the small hospital room.

Langdon recoiled, certain he had been shot, but the noise had not been the attacker's gun. Rather, the bang had been the slam of the room's heavy metal door as Dr. Brooks threw herself against it and turned the lock.

Eyes wild with fear, Dr. Brooks immediately spun and crouched beside her blood-soaked colleague, searching for a pulse. Dr. Marconi coughed up a mouthful of blood, which dribbled down his cheek across his thick beard. Then he fell limp.

'Enrico, no! Ti prego!' she screamed.

Outside, a barrage of bullets exploded against the metal exterior of the door. Shouts of alarm filled the hall.

Somehow, Langdon's body was in motion, panic and instinct now overruling his sedatives. As he clambered awkwardly out of bed, a searing hot pain tore into his right forearm. For an instant, he thought a bullet had passed through the door and hit him, but when he looked down, he realized his IV had snapped

off in his arm. The plastic catheter poked out of a jagged hole in his forearm, and warm blood was already flowing backward out of the tube.

Langdon was now fully awake.

Crouched beside Marconi's body, Dr. Brooks kept searching for a pulse as tears welled in her eyes. Then, as if a switch had been flipped inside her, she stood and turned to Langdon. Her expression transformed before his eyes, her young features hardening with all the detached composure of a seasoned ER doctor dealing with a crisis.

'Follow me,' she commanded.

Dr. Brooks grabbed Langdon's arm and pulled him across the room. The sounds of gunfire and chaos continued in the hallway as Langdon lurched forward on unstable legs. His mind felt alert but his heavily drugged body was slow to respond. *Move!* The tile floor felt cold beneath his feet, and his thin hospital gown was scarcely long enough to cover his six-foot frame. He could feel blood dripping down his forearm and pooling in his palm.

Bullets continued to slam against the heavy door-knob, and Dr. Brooks pushed Langdon roughly into a small bathroom. She was about to follow when she paused, turned around, and ran back toward the counter and grabbed his bloody Harris Tweed.

Forget my damned jacket!

She returned clutching his jacket and quickly locked the bathroom door. Just then, the door in the outer room crashed open.

The young doctor took control. She strode through the tiny bathroom to a second door, yanked it open, and led Langdon into an adjoining recovery room. Gunfire echoed behind them as Dr. Brooks stuck her

head out into the hallway and quickly grabbed Langdon's arm, pulling him across the corridor into a stairwell. The sudden motion made Langdon dizzy; he sensed that he could pass out at any moment.

The next fifteen seconds were a blur . . . descending stairs . . . stumbling . . . falling. The pounding in Langdon's head was almost unbearable. His vision seemed even more blurry now, and his muscles were sluggish, each movement feeling like a delayed reaction.

And then the air grew cold.

I'm outside.

As Dr. Brooks hustled him along a dark alley away from the building, Langdon stepped on something sharp and fell, hitting the pavement hard. She struggled to get him back to his feet, cursing out loud the fact that he had been sedated.

As they neared the end of the alley, Langdon stumbled again. This time she left him on the ground, rushing into the street and yelling to someone in the distance. Langdon could make out the faint green light of a taxi parked in front of the hospital. The car didn't move, its driver undoubtedly asleep. Dr. Brooks screamed and waved her arms wildly. Finally the taxi's headlights came on and it moved lazily toward them.

Behind Langdon in the alley, a door burst open, followed by the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. He turned and saw the dark figure bounding toward him. Langdon tried to get back to his feet, but the doctor was already grabbing him, forcing him into the backseat of an idling Fiat taxi. He landed half on the seat and half on the floor as Dr. Brooks dove on top of him, yanking the door shut.

The sleepy-eyed driver turned and stared at the bizarre duo that had just tumbled into his cab – a young, ponytailed woman in scrubs and a man in a half-torn gown with a bleeding arm. He clearly was about ready to tell them to get the hell out of his car, when the side mirror exploded. The woman in black leather sprinted out of the alley, gun extended. Her pistol hissed again just as Dr. Brooks grabbed Langdon's head, pulling it down. The rear window exploded, showering them with glass.

The driver needed no further encouragement. He slammed his foot down on the gas, and the taxi peeled out.

Langdon teetered on the brink of consciousness. *Someone is trying to kill me?*

Once they had rounded a corner, Dr. Brooks sat up and grabbed Langdon's bloody arm. The catheter was protruding awkwardly from a hole in his flesh.

'Look out the window,' she commanded.

Langdon obeyed. Outside, ghostly tombstones rushed by in the darkness. It seemed somehow fitting that they were passing a cemetery. Langdon felt the doctor's fingers probing gently for the catheter and then, without warning, she wrenched it out.

A searing bolt of pain traveled directly to Langdon's head. He felt his eyes rolling back, and then everything went black.