

# Chapter 1

In the dimly lit archives of an ancient library and crypt under Roslyn Chapel ruins, Dr. Elena Godfrey gazed down at an ancient scroll, her breath fogging the cold air. The only light from her lantern cast flickering shadows over the carved stone coffins. She brushed centuries of dust from the parchment and felt her pulse quicken. Etched in the faded velum was the definitive emblem of the Knights Templar, the crimson cross pat'ee.



This wasn't another burial record or Crusader relic, she realized. This was different, older, perhaps even dangerous. Someone had intentionally hidden these records. "This parchment is no ordinary record of Templar history. It's as if it whispers secrets of the Templars that have been hidden for centuries," she thought. She reached for her notebook, translating aloud as her eyes adjusted to the archaic script.

*"Verily, the enmity betwixt the twain factions hath surpassed reconciliation... Thorne Ravenscroft, that staunch dissenter, commands forces that outnumber ours twofold..."*

Elena froze. Thorne Ravenscroft? She'd never seen that name in any Templar registry.

*"They have delved into arcane rites and impious ceremonies... The Almighty would smite us for such sacrilege."*

A shiver crawled up her spine. This was no ordinary schism. It described a *split*—a Templar civil war. One side stayed true to their Christian oath. The other, led by Ravenscroft, embraced something else—something dark.

"I know someone's down there," a voice said from above.

She startled, clutching the scroll. The only person who knew she was here was Caitriona MacIntyre—Lady of Dunraig and her closest friend.

But the voice wasn't Cat's.

Elena extinguished the lantern, ears straining in the silence. Then she heard it—angry voices, hurried steps. And one word that made its way down the chamber entrance: *explosives*.

She moved. Fast.

Stuffing the scroll into a protective tube, she scrambled toward the hidden passage she'd discovered days earlier—a narrow priest's hole once used by Catholics fleeing persecution. Heart hammering, she ducked into the narrow tunnel, but stopped for a moment, catching her breath.

She listened intently. "I don't care if the entrance is permanently lost. Set the explosives!" a commanding voice shouted.

Hearing the word explosives again, her instincts surged, propelled her into swift action. Without hesitation, she started running and made her way further into the concealed rear exit.

Elena climbed the steps, panting. She stepped into the chilly Scottish night, her resolve unwavering. Without a second thought, she darted toward the concealed copse of trees, where her Jeep lay hidden. Her years as a high school sprinter served her well.

A moment later, she heard an explosion and turned to watch a dust cloud above the walls of the Roslyn Chapel. "Just in time," she thought. Elena leaped behind the wheel, inserted her key, and peeled away. "Why do I always get into these situations?"

In her rearview mirror, the cloud of smoke rose higher from the ruins of the chapel.

The wind screamed past her open window as the Jeep tore across the fields toward the estate. Just five more miles.

She flicked a glance at the mirror.

Headlights.

Her breath caught. They were following.

“Just one more mile,” she whispered, as if saying it could make it true.

Elena swerved into the muddy track that cut across Cat’s property. Her Jeep fought for traction, sliding, digging, grinding forward.

Behind her, the headlights skidded sideways into the muck, stuck.

She didn’t look back again.

At the manor steps, Elena slammed the Jeep to a halt and bolted for the door, backpack clutched to her chest. She pounded on the heavy oak.

The door opened to reveal Grafton Harland, Caitriona’s chief of security. He towered over her, his former Delta Force presence cloaked in a formal black suit.

“Miss Elena?” he said sharply.

“I was followed,” she gasped. “The crypt’s been bombed.”

Grafton didn’t hesitate. He jabbed an alarm button. Sirens screamed across the estate. Guards moved into position. He took Elena by the arm and led her inside, where Caitriona met them at the landing.

“Elena—what happened?”

Elena could barely speak, still clutching the scroll.

“They tried to kill me.

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Despite the urgency of the moment, Cat took hold of Elena’s elbow to guide her away. “Let’s get you up to my sitting room and away from all this.

Cat’s sitting room was more of a lounge with overstuffed leather chairs, a plush rug, and dark wood paneling. The diamond-paned windows looked west over the River South Esk. On a clear day, one could see the river easily.

Cat had ordered tea brought up, and after a few sips, Elena began to calm down. “Maybe there is something about ‘steamin’ tea,” she thought.

“Feelin’ better now?” Cat’s accent became more pronounced when she was excited. “Now I’m thinkin’ it’s time to tell me the whole story. Don’t leave anything out.”

Cat leaned back in her leather-upholstered chair, her dark auburn hair almost blending with the brown leather.

Elena paused to take a sip of tea. “They dynamited the main entrance as I ran to my Jeep. They chased me back here, and you know the rest.”

“The danger’s over, Elena. Calm down and show me what you discovered,” Cat instructed.

Elena took a calming breath, then retrieved a vellum scroll from her bag. She spread it out on the low table between them and began to read. “This is what I found,” Elena said. Then she began to read.

*“Verily, the enmity betwixt the twain factions hath surpassed reconciliation. Thorne Ravenscroft, that staunch dissenter, commands forces that outnumber ours twofold. Forsooth, they have delved into arcane rites and impious ceremonies for many a year, urging our compliance. Yet we cannot yield! The Almighty would smite us for such sacrilege.”*

“As I finished, that’s when I heard shouting above ground, followed by an explosion. Luckily, there was that hidden exit at the back of the crypt. I got out that way and ran to my Jeep. They chased me back here. I drove across that muddy field, and they got stuck. You know the rest.”

“This is incredible. What else does the document say?” Caitriona asked, leaning forward.

Elena bent over the manuscript and read aloud. *“Verily, the schism proved naught but turmoil, though we sought sanctuary within yon chapel. Armed strife erupted forthwith, and we were bested. Fleeing to the hinterlands, we rode many a mile ere the forest’s shelter embraced us.”*

Elena became calmer as she read aloud. *“Our newfound foe hath relocated to more propitious lands in England. Thus, we mayst return anon and ready this clandestine crypt and repository of ancient scrolls. In secrecy, we shall find safety.”*

She looked up at Cat for a moment, then continued.. *“Verily, to our chagrin, our erstwhile comrades have assumed a fresh mantle—one that mirrors the malevolence of their pursuits. Thorne Ravenscroft hath christened them ‘The Order of the Obsidian Serpent.’”*

Cat gulped. “It truly sounds evil!” She then looked into the eyes of her friend and announced, “That’s enough for tonight. You’re exhausted, and so am I. She rose from her chair and motioned for Elena to do the same. “Guid tae yer bed, lassie,” Cat instructed in her best Scottish accent.

“You’ll be safe tonight. If Grafton and his team can protect the Royals when they visit, he can see to your security.”

Elena retired to her chamber, slumber claiming her as her head met the pillow.