

An excerpt from

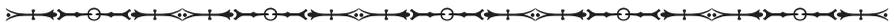
‡ INFERNO ‡

by

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≡ **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All artwork, literature, science, and historical references in this novel are real.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 dolent city, I flee.
Through the eternal 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 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 hesitation must be left behind.

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. Beseeking.

They are behind me, unyielding, closing in.

They do not understand what is coming . . . nor what I have done for them!

Ungrateful land!

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!"

Madness breeds madness.

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

For precisely the love of God, I will not.

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 reason, I have climbed halfway to heaven.

Without warning, I turn and reach up, curling my fingers onto the high ledge, pulling myself up, scrambling onto 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 ignorants! 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 even now . . . waiting . . . simmering beneath the bloodred waters of the lagoon that reflects no 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 name not as a monstrous sinner, but as the glorious savior you know I truly am. I pray Mankind will understand the gift I leave behind.

My gift is the future.

My gift is salvation.

My gift is Inferno.

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

CHAPTER 1

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

A veiled woman.

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 *tainia* 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. And ye shall find.

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 and find.

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 in . . . Robert?* “Is that . . . *me?*”

The woman's face revealed nothing. *Seek and find*, 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 and ye shall find*. "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 single dove had changed everything.

Now she had come to make it right.