

High atop the steps of the Great Pyramid of Giza, a young woman laughed and called down to him. 'Robert, hurry up! I knew I should have married a younger man!' Her smile was magic.

He struggled to keep up, but his legs felt like stone. 'Wait,' he begged. 'Please . . .'

As he climbed, his vision began to blur. There was a thundering in his ears. *I must reach her!* But when he looked up again, the woman had disappeared. In her place stood an old man with rotting teeth. The man stared down, curling his lips into a lonely grimace. Then he let out a scream of anguish that resounded across the desert.

Robert Langdon awoke with a start from his nightmare. The phone beside his bed was ringing. Dazed, he picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'I'm looking for Robert Langdon,' a man's voice said.

Langdon sat up in his empty bed and tried to clear his mind. 'This . . . is Robert Langdon.' He squinted at his digital clock. It was 5.18 a.m.

'I must see you immediately.'

'Who is this?'

'My name is Maximilian Kohler. I'm a discrete particle physicist.'

'A *what?*' Langdon could barely focus. 'Are you sure you've got the right Langdon?'

'You're a professor of religious iconology at Harvard University. You've written three books on symbology and—'

'Do you know what time it is?'

'I apologize. I have something you need to see. I can't discuss it on the phone.'

A knowing groan escaped Langdon's lips. This had happened before. One of the perils of writing books about religious symbology was the calls from religious zealots who wanted him to confirm their latest sign from God. Last month, a stripper from Oklahoma had promised Langdon the best sex of his life if he would fly down and verify the authenticity of a cruciform that had magically appeared on her bed sheets. *The Shroud of Tulsa*, Langdon had called it.

'How did you get my number?' Langdon tried to be polite, despite the hour.

'On the Worldwide Web. The site for your book.'

Langdon frowned. He was damn sure his book's site did not include his home phone number. The man was obviously lying.

'I need to see you,' the caller insisted. 'I'll pay you well.'

Now Langdon was getting mad. 'I'm sorry, but I really—'

'If you leave immediately, you can be here by—'

'I'm not going anywhere! It's five o'clock in the morning!' Langdon hung up and collapsed back in bed. He closed his eyes and tried to fall back asleep. It

was no use. The dream was emblazoned in his mind. Reluctantly, he put on his robe and went downstairs.

Robert Langdon wandered barefoot through his deserted Massachusetts Victorian home and nursed his ritual insomnia remedy – a mug of steaming Nestlé's Quik. The April moon filtered through the bay windows and played on the oriental carpets. Langdon's colleagues often joked that his place looked more like an anthropology museum than a home. His shelves were packed with religious artifacts from around the world – an *ekuaba* from Ghana, a gold cross from Spain, a cycladic idol from the Aegean, and even a rare woven *boccus* from Borneo, a young warrior's symbol of perpetual youth.

As Langdon sat on his brass Maharishi's chest and savored the warmth of the chocolate, the bay window caught his reflection. The image was distorted and pale . . . like a ghost. *An aging ghost*, he thought, cruelly reminded that his youthful spirit was living in a mortal shell.

Although not overly handsome in a classical sense, the forty-five-year-old Langdon had what his female colleagues referred to as an 'erudite' appeal – wisps of gray in his thick brown hair, probing blue eyes, an arrestingly deep voice, and the strong, carefree smile of a collegiate athlete. A varsity diver in prep school and college, Langdon still had the body of a swimmer, a toned, six-foot physique that he vigilantly maintained with fifty laps a day in the university pool.

Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons* (2000)