

My Name Is Cain

Dean Sparks

Chapter One

Hannah had never lived in a place as strange as the Abbey of St. Margaret. The fortresslike convent, with three stories of solid exterior walls, a moat with a drawbridge, and modern defenses, housed more than a hundred nuns, some of whom worked with Vatican Intelligence researching potential threats to the Catholic Church.

Fog from the Thames River a few blocks away obscured Hannah's view of movements around the drawbridge the abbey's Mother Superior entrusted her to protect. She glanced at Mykaela, her friend of two months, and knew that today's goings-on equally baffled her. Mykaela had not taken her vows yet, so she was still a novice.

The Mother Superior believed a few nuns knew more about her than they should. She also believed that an attack was imminent; but Hannah knew that in its long years of existence, no one had ever breached the security of the abbey.

Today, however, the lowering of the drawbridge heralded a new dawn. Sister Hannah felt, rather than heard, the great metal chains as they rotated off their posts and vibrated through the thick stone walls. To the outside world, all appeared normal and safe. However, the air was thick with tension. According to the ancient Mother Superior, the boys were coming.

As Hannah looked at her computer, she wondered why she had been selected to monitor the only entrance to the abbey. Maybe it was because she was at least thirty years younger than anyone, except Mykaela, who was twenty. Perhaps it was a test for her to keep her scholarship to Oxford. She switched views to a different camera hidden within a false stone above the entry. Other nuns monitored cameras that scanned the perimeter, roof, and courtyard. Motion detectors zeroed in on any object larger than a sparrow around the drawbridge.

Only women could enter the Abbey of St. Margaret. Hannah watched as Mrs. Brockhurst, who was always the first to arrive, crossed the bridge and entered the single ironclad gate to say her morning prayers in the Glass Chapel. She listened to Sister Mabel greet her in the small foyer and knew another nun had pressed the release button so she could be escorted through the thick iron doors and into the inner sanctum.

“Incoming worm,” another sister, Gertrude, said from the computer station beside Hannah. Sister Gertrude was responsible for computer security. Her chair creaked when she shifted her weight. Though she was six inches shorter than Hannah’s nearly six-foot height, she outweighed Hannah by at least two hundred pounds. Sister Gertrude typed a command and smiled. “Identity confirmed. Our attacker is Lawrence McKinney, sophomore, computer sciences, Oxford University, Kappa Lambda Omega.”

A cheer rose from the twenty-six nuns who hovered in anticipation. *This is too weird*, Hannah thought, but she knew the history. Sixty years earlier, the young men from the KLO

fraternity thought it might be fun for the freshmen pledges to try to get into in the abbey as part of their initiation. A pledge received a demerit if caught by a nun or the police. If he succeeded in entering the abbey, he would avoid the humiliating induction process and be granted immediate membership into the prestigious fraternity.

After every pledge had failed, a much younger Mother Evelyn had sent the president of the fraternity a letter accusing the pledges of not being innovative enough. Since then, the abbey challenged them to set foot within its confines during pledge week.

Mother Evelyn had established a few simple rules. First, no permanent harm could come to either the nuns or the students, eliminating the use of firearms or explosives. Second, the public must never be aware of the contest. Third, if a pledge succeeded in his quest, the abbey would reward the fraternity with one hundred thousand pounds. Fourth, if either of the first two rules were broken, the contest would end permanently. The fraternity president accepted the challenge.

Some pledges tried to talk their way in. Many attempted briberies. A few were cleverer. Pledges who tried parachuting were hit by a powerful wind that blew them off course and into the chilly moat. The ropes were cut for those who tried to scale the walls. In 1973, a group of engineering students dug a tunnel under the moat, but even they were stopped.

Mother Evelyn leaned on her black cane with a white angel's head carved in the handle and white angel wings flowing down the upper part of the shaft. With her shoulders hunched over as if time were curling her body back to the fetal position, she walked to the master control station to the left of Hannah. She wore heavy wool robes and a veil covered most of her face. Her rich brown eyes normally expressed her warm and caring nature, but this morning, they were sharp as razors.

“Places, ladies. The game is afoot. Let’s see if the boys can give our defenses a real test this year,” Mother Evelyn said with a touch of humor in her clear alto voice. The majority of the nuns filed out of the room to go to their assigned positions. Hannah watched as Mother Evelyn sat at her massive antique desk overlooking a dozen computer screens in a half circle. The Mother glanced at the large screen on the front wall, surrounded by a frame with small cherubs carved in the mahogany. Every computer screen was duplicated on it in twelve separate boxes. “Did you use your new reverse-worm attack, Sister Gertrude?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did it melt the poor boy’s computer?”

“No, ma’am,” Sister Gertrude replied, and Hannah noticed her grin with suppressed pride. “I’m not sure that’s possible, but his computer will soon be wiped clean.”

Gertrude began explaining the design of her attack, but Hannah ignored her as she noticed a motion detector alert on her own screen. “Second entrant approaching the bridge,” Hannah said over the faint strings of Mozart playing in the background. She felt annoyed that her voice quivered with nervousness.

The Mother switched the view of the drawbridge to the main screen and remained silent for a few seconds longer than Hannah expected. Then she loudly cleared her throat. “Sister Hannah, did you forget about the fog?”

Hannah looked up at the main screen and saw only milky white. She felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment as she typed a command on her keyboard. “My apologies, Mother. Switching to infrared.”

The large screen flickered and showed the moat below the bridge as cool blue. The drawbridge was dull green, retaining some of the heat from the abbey. A sole pedestrian, in stark shades of red, pink, and yellow, strolled across the fog-shrouded bridge. Two big blue circles glowed on the person’s chest.

Hannah snickered as she spoke to Sister Mabel. “One male approaching disguised as a woman. He used water balloons to enhance his chest but wasn’t wise enough to use warm water.”

Hannah split her screen to include the view of the small entry foyer where Sister Mabel sat behind a simple desk reading from her Bible. Hannah cringed as Mabel's gruff voice came through the speaker. "Sister Hannah, this may seem like a game, but it is very serious, so please don't insert any of your silly Americanisms."

If any nun at the abbey looked like an old hag, it was Sister Mabel. More than forty years ago, she had come to St. Margaret asking for sanctuary. Her husband had beat her so badly that half of her teeth were missing as well as her left eye. Due to a damaged larynx, her voice sounded like a truck traveling down a gravel road.

Before the man crossing the bridge arrived, Sister Mabel removed her dentures, leaving spaces where teeth were missing. She removed her eye patch, revealing a yellowed, off-center eye with a blood-red iris, which was actually a miniature camera. She looked scary enough to make a soldier shudder.

A young lady in a bright blue dress with gold cross-stitch embroidery entered the foyer. Her hat, purse, gloves, and shoes matched the dress. She approached the desk and placed her purse on its edge. The fog from outside swirled around her feet.

Hannah turned up the volume.

"How may I serve you today?" Sister Mabel asked.

“I seek entrance into the Abbey of St. Margaret,” said an obviously false soprano.

Sister Mabel closed her Bible and pulled a sheet of paper from her desk. “Your name?”

“Beth Winsomore.”

Sister Mabel quirked a bushy eyebrow. “Your place of residence?”

“Lambeth.”

Sister Mabel increased the sternness in her voice. “Miss Winsomore, the abbey is only open to women. Men may not enter. Are you male or female?”

“Female.”

“I believe you are male. Therefore, entrance is denied.”

“You are mistaken,” the young man replied. He placed his hands on his hips and thrust out his exaggerated chest. “I am a female and wish to enter.”

“Then disrobe and prove me wrong,” Sister Mabel growled.

The man nearly lost his balance as he stomped a high-heeled shoe defiantly. “It’s obvious I am female. You’re a sick woman wanting to see my personals. Now let me in!”

“Mabel, show him the folly of his ways,” Mother Evelyn commanded.

Sister Mabel rose from her chair and revealed her intimidating six-and-a-half-foot frame with broad shoulders. A touch of fear crawled across the visitor’s face as she hobbled closer and loomed over him. She bent down slowly, as if it caused her pain, and peered into his eyes. Then, without warning, she punched his left breast with a classic karate chop.

The water balloon burst, drenching the front of the blue dress. The lad rolled his eyes in annoyance. Muttering under his breath with a distinctly masculine voice, he stalked out of the foyer and back across the bridge.

Mabel’s laughter was not pleasant, but it was genuine. Through Mabel’s camera in her false eye, Hannah watched as she opened the purse the boy had left sitting on her desk. Hannah noted a small video camera inside, but Mabel didn’t touch it.

A warning note sounded from Hannah’s computer and drew her attention to another person crossing the bridge, also dressed in a bright blue dress with gold cross-stich embroidery. She wore a matching hat, purse, gloves, and shoes. Although the dress looked the same, Hannah

noticed an oddity and scanned the visitor with another sensor embedded in the drawbridge.

“Mother Evelyn, the embroidery in the first dress was simply colored thread. The threading in the dress of our current visitor is made of real gold. There are also electronic components built into her shoes.”

Mother Evelyn peered at Hannah, and the wrinkles around her eyes deepened. “Is our visitor male or female?”

Hannah double-checked her readings. “I believe female, ma’am.”

“She may enter,” Mother Evelyn stated and leaned back in her chair.

Seeing how the gold embroidery connected to the electronics in the shoes, Hannah felt it wise to object. “But she’s up to something.”

“Of course she is. It’s your job to figure out what. It’s not your job to deny entrance to any woman.”

Hannah felt her heart flutter from the Mother’s rebuke, so she transferred an electronic schematic of the dress and shoes to a file. She watched the girl’s face as she entered the foyer and noticed she looked almost identical to the first visitor. As she approached the desk, Sister Mabel stood. “I believe your sister left her purse. I’m sure you’ll want to return it to her.”

The girl chuckled. "I'll be glad to return it. But that was not my sister; he is my twin brother."

"Of course," Sister Mabel replied and sat back down. "How may I serve you today?"

"I seek entrance into the Abbey of St. Margaret," the girl said in a genuine soprano with identical inflections as her brother.

"Your name?"

"Beth Winsomore."

"Your place of residence?"

"Lambeth."

Mabel increased the sternness in her voice. "Miss Winsomore, the abbey is only open to women. Men may not enter. Are you male or female?"

"Female and willing to prove it." She placed her purse against the identical one sitting on the desk.

“That won’t be necessary. You may enter.”

Hannah heard the lock on the heavy iron door click. The door opened slowly. Mabel said, “Another nun will escort you to the Glass Chapel or the library. Enjoy your visit, and may the Lord God bless your day.”

As the young lady approached the opening door, Hannah saw Mabel look down at the two purses remaining on her desk. “Miss Winsomere, you forgot your purses.”

“No, I didn’t.”

As Mabel watched, Hannah saw green gas billow out from where the two purses touched. She sucked in a breath of horror as Mabel closed her eye and the camera turned dark. She cringed as she heard Mabel’s forehead slam against the table.

Hannah felt the blood drain from her face, and her hands began to shake. “I am so sorry. I should have caught the chemicals coating the purses. They weren’t dangerous until they came in contact with each other.”

Mother Evelyn typed, “I thought it was clever. Lower the portcullis. Lock the main door. Fill the foyer with a concealing fog at plus twenty psi pressure.”

Hannah felt relieved that the Mother didn't make a big deal out of her mistake. She punched keys without looking. Her attention remained focused on her computer. "Two men crossing the drawbridge. They're wearing gas masks and carrying welding torches."

"Activity at the power juncture on Bell Street," Sister Gertrude interjected.

"They are well organized this year," the Mother replied.

Hearing Gertrude's calm, Hannah reduced the excitement in her own voice. "Miss Winsomore is blocking the door with her body, so I can't lock it."

Mother Evelyn's chair squeaked as she leaned forward and spoke into her microphone. "Team one, remove Miss Winsomore from the door and take her to the dining room. Team four, retrieve Mabel from the foyer. The boys will cut through the portcullis in a few minutes. Hannah, as soon as team four is clear, close the secondary doors and prepare to drop the foyer floor."

Everyone hurried to fulfill the Mother's instructions. Hannah barely noticed when the lights went out since her computer screen didn't flicker. Within ten seconds, the emergency lights came on, bathing the room in a reddish glow.

“They’ve cut the electrical lines,” Gertrude reported. “There’s no electricity in a ten-block radius.”

Sister Mary Ruth, who sat between Hannah and Gertrude monitoring the exterior of the abbey, spoke. “I have s-simultaneous activity on the n-north, south, and w-west lawns.” Her eighty-seven-year-old body shook with tremors of Parkinson’s disease. “There is s-seismic activity in the s-sewer lines beneath Boragan S-street.”

Mother Evelyn split the large viewing screen into four quadrants. The view from the foyer moved to a smaller monitor beneath the main. In the top left quadrant, a lone teenager struggled with a jackhammer that bounced against the wall. He stood knee deep in murky water.

The other three quadrants looked blurry because of the fog, but it was thinning as the sun rose higher. The bottom left quadrant showed a large flatbed truck backing toward the east side of the moat. Six young men pulled a tarp off the rear of the truck, revealing a large catapult holding a white ball about six feet wide. Six more young men in black skin suits filled the top right quadrant. They stood across from the west moat holding coils of rope attached to grappling hooks. The bottom right quadrant showed the Bank of England parking lot behind the abbey. It bordered the moat on the south side across from the Glass Chapel. An old Toyota pickup with a wooden crate in the bed, sat unoccupied at the edge of the parking lot where it had been left two days earlier. According to Gertrude, the truck belonged to a local company contracted to paint the interior of the bank.

Hannah turned to report the activity at the gate and noticed the Mother Superior staring so intently at the four views on the screen that she seemed to straighten the hump in her back. “Why are they avoiding technology? Everything they are trying failed fifty years ago. They’re not even using video cameras to record anything. What are they up to?”

“I don’t detect any cell phones in use,” Gertrude said.

“Team three, prepare your pikes and bolt cutters to remove grappling hooks. Ignore the sewer. It’s a decoy. Raise the magnetic repulser on the east roof and focus on the catapult. I’m sure there’s a boy in that sphere. Try not to send him into the moat. Sister Hannah, is the door secure?”

“Yes, ma’am. But they have nearly cut through the front gate.”

“As expected,” Mother Evelyn stated. “Mary Ruth, this does not feel right. Someone is coaching them. I can almost sense his . . . Mykaela, give me an infrared view of the truck behind the Glass Chapel.”

The main screen switched to a computer-generated three-dimensional view. Having sat in the bank parking lot all night, the truck looked similar to the ambient air. In the back of the truck, a large metal machine, inside a crate, took shape with various shades of orange and red as it

started to warm up. Hundreds of small wires led from a rectangular machine into a large dark-red sphere.

“Two p-paragliders riding in from the w-west. Air compression t-tanks and fans ready to b-blow. Estimated t-time of arrival is three m-minutes.”

The Mother stood so suddenly her chair crashed to the floor. “That’s not paint equipment. Emergency! Gertrude, move to defense level five. Mary Ruth, tell all those protecting the roof to secure themselves against the wind. Wait fifteen seconds, and then move all fans and compressors to full power. Form vortex pattern gamma. Hit the catapult with the magnet at one hundred percent. Turn the truck over if you must. Hannah, drop the foyer floor ninety degrees and raise the drawbridge. Mary Ruth, get Sisters Hildegard, Maura, and Teresa to the infirmary immediately.”

Mother Evelyn left her desk and headed toward the door. “I must get to the courtyard. “Gertrude, after the wave hits and assuming we are safe, take Hannah and Mary Ruth with you to my office.”

“What wave?” Gertrude and Mary Ruth said in unison.

The Mother did not answer. Everyone stabbed at their keyboards, sending emergency instructions all around the abbey. Hannah dropped the foyer floor and plunged the boys wielding

the torches into the moat. The drawbridge began to rise at her command. On the main screen, she saw the truck with the catapult flip on its side. Nuns on the west roof used bolt cutters to clip the ropes of the young men trying to scale the wall.

Hannah was still typing when the wave hit her. She didn't scream, although she felt like it. For a few seconds, her skin felt as if a million ants were crawling under it. Sweat beaded on her brow, and she grew warmer. Her ears rang as if someone had clapped a symbol behind her head. The computers shut down.

Hannah could no longer see. For a few seconds, all she heard was Sister Mary Ruth's panicked breathing. "I n-need to be r-replaced. I am b-blind." Hannah pulled out the lighter she kept with her to light candles. She flicked it, and the flame shed a little light. "You're not blind. The lights went out."

In the darkness, Hannah heard the Mother descend the stairs, her cane striking every third step.

"W-what in the b-blazes happened?"

"I believe the boys used an electromagnetic pulse," Gertrude replied.

Chapter Two

The Mother Superior ran down the stairs, being careful as she rounded the corner to avoid slipping on the stones worn smooth by three hundred years of nun's footsteps. She could hear senior nuns shouting commands to light candles and move to the roof. She felt proud of them for not panicking. She hoped the three nuns with pacemakers would survive.

Upon reaching the ground floor, she entered the courtyard. She saw sisters on the roof of the east and west wings, which held the individual cells for the seventy-eight nuns who called the Abbey of St. Margaret home. The voices above and behind her told her that more nuns protected the roof on the front of the abbey containing offices, the dining hall, infirmary, and classrooms. The rising sun reflected off the Glass Chapel, with its stained-glass roof, in front of her. She arrived at the Pool of Secrets in the center of the courtyard, where for the first time in many years no water splashed from the cherubic fountains.

No man had ever set foot within the abbey. Mother Evelyn's ancient heart fluttered as she reached the fountain and gazed at the open sky. "We are vulnerable."

The fog vortex swirling above the abbey dissipated as the fans stopped rotating. Two red paragliders approached from the west and descended toward the courtyard. The Mother glared at them as if sheer force of will might blow them off course.

The gliders came closer. Less than twenty yards from the west wall, both pilots dipped their left flaps and tacked due north. The nuns on the roof cheered as the gliders splashed in the moat. At the foot of the fountain, Mother Evelyn collapsed to her knees and bowed her head to pray.

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“An electromagnetic pulse?” Hannah asked.

“The EMP corrupts electronics in a small area.” Gertrude removed a large candle from a bookshelf and lit it. “Follow me. We have work to do.”

“Where are we going?” Hannah asked as Gertrude led her down the hall.

“To the Templar Chamber. Security functions will receive emergency power first, and the backup computers should come online in about three minutes.”

“What is a Templar Chamber?”

“The M-mother has many secrets,” Sister Mary Ruth warbled. “She only sh-shares them with a s-select few. Gertrude will explain when we get there.”

“You would have learned some of them when you were old enough, but I believe this emergency has moved your timetable up a bit.” Holding the candle aloft, Gertrude approached Mother Evelyn’s office, removed a large key from her bosom, and opened the door. Hannah gasped as Gertrude broke the rule and stepped inside without the Mother present. Mary Ruth followed and with reluctance, so did Hannah.

The office was spacious, with dark mahogany paneling, ivory inlays, thick Persian rugs, and a massive desk in the center. Hannah felt as if she’d walked into a room of ancient wealth. Two antique couches faced each other, and a small table with four chairs sat in the corner. A computer screen on the desk was the only visible electronic device. The large leather-bound books on the ornately carved shelf behind the desk, and the scrolls encased behind crystal glass, showed that the Mother was a collector of ancient texts.

The single candle cast an eerie glow, and the walls seemed to absorb the faint light. Gertrude walked to an alabaster table against the far wall, which prominently displayed a large Bible. She opened the book to Genesis 1 and placed her right palm on the center of the page.

“Genesis?” Mary Ruth said. “The c-code page changed t-to Exodus chapter thirty-four yesterday.”

“I missed devotions yesterday,” Gertrude confessed as she turned to Exodus 34. “Mother Evelyn says there is more wisdom behind the words in the Bible than in all the other books in the world put together.”

Mary Ruth touched Hannah’s hand. “When w-we are alone, you can dispense with p-proper titles.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think I can call the Mother Superior just by her name.”

“Mother will do.” Gertrude placed her hand on the center of the page, and a faint green glow emitted from the open Bible. The table receded into the floor, revealing a stone staircase leading into darkness.

Hannah felt a cold breeze from below, but the chill that ran up her spine wasn’t from the temperature. *What’s happening?* Hannah thought. *An EMP, backup computers, secret codes that worked on a green Bible with no electricity, and what in the world is a Templar Chamber?*

Gertrude picked up two more candles from the bookcase and lit them before starting their descent. The steep, narrow stairs led straight down without twisting or turning.

Hannah jumped when the door slid shut behind her. A faint musty smell emanated from the rough-hewn stone walls as they traveled down at least fifty uneven steps.

The stairs ended in a small chamber of gray stone with only one door to Hannah's right. Mary Ruth approached a recessed shelf in the stone wall across from the stairs where a small vase with three plastic daisies sat. She waved her hands in her jerking fashion over the fake flowers, and Hannah assumed the flowers contained a pheromone sensor like the ones she monitored on the drawbridge. She also assumed it would unlock the thick iron door, so she turned toward it and waited to hear it unlock. The room went dark. Hannah spun around and groped for either of the two sisters, but they were no longer there. Swallowing to keep panic out of her voice, she whispered, "Sister Mary Ruth, where are you?"

Mary Ruth's voice warbled through the wall to the left. "The iron door is a decoy. Please k-keep up, and why are you w-whispering?" Mary Ruth's shaking hand reached through the wall that appeared to be made of solid stone, grabbed Hannah's arm, and pulled her through.

Florescent lights flickered on, and Hannah found Gertrude already at a computer on the other side of the room. Six computer stations sat in a semicircle along the back wall contrasting with the large ancient cuneiform letters carved into the gray stone of a round room. Mary Ruth sat and directed Hannah to the chair beside her.

"Hannah, please check the g-gate. Then review what you can of the last ten m-minutes in your zone."

Hannah couldn't believe the calmness of the older nuns. Her hands shook, making it difficult for her to log in, but she succeeded. She scanned the foyer and saw a man in a rappelling harness wedged in the top of the inner iron door. He was cutting a hole in the door with a blowtorch. Hannah zoomed in and saw three sides of a large square already cut. She typed a command, but nothing happened. "Blowtorch guy is about to cut through the inner door. Can you give me any power?"

"Rerouting emergency power," Gertrude responded as she glanced at Hannah's screen.

Hannah retyped her command, and the blowtorch flew out of the man's hands and stuck to the door, the blue flame burning harmlessly to the side. He tried to pry the torch off the wall but failed. With a look of resignation, he cut the strap hanging from a spike he was hanging on and plunged into the moat. Hannah sighed in relief.

Mother Evelyn stormed into the room, her cane striking the stone floor with sharp clicks. "Gertrude, update me on our current security status."

"Security protocols are at level four. Emergency power has restored the magnetic repulsers and wind generators. Both must be directed manually, which team three is handling. I reviewed the potential points of entry for the last six minutes and found no evidence of trespass. Internal sensors are active, and I don't detect any unauthorized personnel. The boys are vacating

the area. A tow truck removed the Toyota, but the boys are having difficulty with the flatbed I tipped on its side. I've yet to scan for local air traffic."

"Do so," the Mother quipped. "Sister Hannah, welcome to the Chamber. You must solemnly swear to keep secret what you learn today."

Hannah turned and looked at the Mother, sensing the seriousness of her request. "I do."

Mother Evelyn's gaze softened. "Very well. Gertrude, what is our electronic status?"

Gertrude looked grim. "The upstairs mainframe computer rebooted automatically, but all the memory has been wiped. Primary functions are being restored. We must replace or restore every device in the abbey that uses a battery and all stored data that has been wiped. It will take days to recover everything from the backup system. I severed all Internet links temporarily."

"Remain at defense level four. Return to level five as soon as possible. When the mainframe can resume full security functions, transfer control back upstairs. Return one at a time in case the boys make another attempt. I need to make a phone call." Mother Evelyn pulled her phone from a pocket and pressed a key. She slammed the phone down on the desk and looked at Hannah. "Hannah, please go upstairs and see if Mabel has recovered. If so, ask her to go into town and get me a new phone."

Chapter Three

Mother Evelyn climbed the stairs to her office. Before she reached her desk, someone knocked on her door. “Enter.”

Mabel appeared, carrying a cell phone. “A young man just crossed the bridge to deliver this, courtesy of Kappa Lambda Omega.”

Mother Evelyn took the phone. “I assume Miss Winsomore is still in the dining room. Please make her comfortable. I would like to have a chat with her after vespers.”

Mabel nodded and left. A few seconds later, Beethoven’s “Fifth Symphony” filled the room, courtesy of the phone Mother Evelyn held.

She answered and put it on speaker. “Do you concede?”

“Yes, ma’am, we concede.” The pleasant tenor voice held the refined accent of the wealthy aristocracy of Britain.

“That was a dastardly trick you pulled today. It caused a power outage in a ten-block radius.”

“But within our set of rules.”

“Perhaps we should more properly define permanent damage,” the Mother quipped.

“Yes, I have a severely damaged truck.”

The Mother allowed the phone to remain silent for a minute. “I trust you will have an explanation for the media?”

“An article appeared several days ago in the *London Times* concerning a transformer that exploded in Wales. Apparently, the electrical currents arced to other transformers, causing several city blocks to have unusual electrical damage. Since the article was sanctioned by the Oxford Science Department’s newsletter, of which I’m the editor, there should be no questions.”

“And where did you find an EMP?”

“It was loaned to our university by Cal Tech. An anonymous alumnus suggested we use it to eliminate your defenses. Perhaps I may ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“How did you fool my paragliders? With no electricity, you could not have pushed them aside or projected a hologram.”

Mother Evelyn chose her words carefully. “I do not need electricity for smoke and mirrors. We see what we want to see and believe what we want to believe. You made a good effort this year, Mr. Winston. Although you did not win, I will give you a bonus for your team’s inventive efforts. I will transfer fifty thousand pounds into your fraternity’s account as soon as my computers are back online, half of which you will discreetly distribute to my neighbors whose electronics you damaged.”

“Thank you for your generosity. I apologize for the inconvenience we have caused you.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Winston.” She hung up the phone and laid it on her desk.

Mother Evelyn spent the rest of the day supervising repairs to the abbey. The foyer was reset, the inner door replaced, and computer systems partially restored. Vespers came as a relief from the day’s stress. Only twenty nuns chose to attend since Mother Evelyn excused anyone wishing to rest.

Sister Mabel led the evening devotion. Miss Winsomore sighed loudly from the pew behind Mother Evelyn. Gertrude, sitting beside the young lady, cleared her throat in admonishment.

Mary Ruth sat in her customary place across the aisle, and Hannah, feeling sleepy, sat behind her right under the air conditioning vent, a spot no one usually occupied.

As peace descended upon Mother Evelyn, she went through her personal evening litany: contemplation of the past, prayer for the present, and hope for the future. With her knees pressed against the floor, she said the concluding prayers by rote. Her gaze wandered to the beautiful stained-glass ceiling and the stars twinkling on the other side of it.

No man had ever seen the beauty of the chapel, with its finely polished woods and handcrafted alabaster carvings of angels and saints. No man had ever touched the floor where Mother Evelyn knelt. No male voice had ever spoken within the sanctity of the chapel.

“Hello, Mother,” said a distinctly masculine voice.