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THE
PROPHECY



'Kuzneski's writing has raw power'
JAMES PATTERSON



The Prophecy
by
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Prologue

17 June 1566
Salon-de-Provence, France

The letter was written by an apothecary who had gained his notoriety in another field. Knowing the uproar it would cause, Michel sealed it and several documents inside a wooden box. He gave the box to his lawyer on the same day he signed his last will and testament.

The year was 1566. He was sixty-two years old. He died fifteen days later.

When his possessions were divided among his heirs, the box was not mentioned. If it had been, the rest of his estate would have seemed inconsequential, for the contents of the box were far more valuable than gold or jewels or anything that he owned. Knowing this, he added a secret codicil to his will that only his lawyer knew about. The four-page appendix described in very specific terms what was to be done with the mysterious box and, more importantly, *when*.

To ensure that his wishes were followed, Michel established a trust fund that compensated the guardians of his secret from one generation to the next. None of these men knew who their benefactor was – otherwise curiosity would have overwhelmed them, tempting them to open the box. Instead, all they were given was a date and a simple set of instructions.

If they completed their task, they would be paid handsomely for their efforts.

If they didn't, they wouldn't see a cent.

Amazingly, the chain remained unbroken for over four hundred years. Decade after decade, century after century, they followed their orders like scripture and were rewarded as promised. Wars raged throughout Europe, but somehow the box survived. Cities burned to the ground, but somehow the box survived. No matter what happened, no matter where it was stored, the box *always* survived – as if it had a guardian angel. Or was protected by magic.

Those familiar with Michel might have suspected the latter, since he had been publicly accused of practising the dark arts on more than one occasion. But those charges never stuck. Partly because of his connection to the queen of France, a loyal patron who believed in his special

powers, and partly because of his cunning. Nearly everything he had written was hidden in plain sight, published for the world to see, but purposely ambiguous. This was his way of avoiding prosecution. Authorities couldn't convict him of witchcraft or wizardry because his writings could be interpreted in a variety of ways, most of which were benign.

Yet most scholars knew his work was anything but innocuous. They realized it was complex, and layered, and intentionally cryptic. The proverbial enigma, wrapped in a riddle, shrouded in mystery. Just like the man himself. Of course, Michel knew how he was perceived, which was why he penned his final letter in straightforward language and sealed it inside the box.

This was his last chance to explain himself to the world.

His last chance to warn the human race.

I

Present Day
Tuesday, 1 December
Geneva, Switzerland

Louis Keller had been waiting for this moment for over thirty years, ever since his dying father had explained what must be done in the distant future. For five generations, their family had been in charge of a mysterious trust fund at Capital Savings, the second-largest bank in Switzerland, and now, after three decades of waiting, the big day was finally here.

Keller would soon be free.

In the beginning, he had viewed his duties with frustration, nothing more than a silly game that his father had forced him to play. But as the years went on, his viewpoint had started to change. What had once been a mild annoyance was now a burden he was forced to bear, a yoke he couldn't shake. Although he was a healthy man, he'd had trouble sleeping in recent months, afraid he would

pass away before he completed his final task, worried he would let down his ancestors. He realized it was a foolish thought, completely irrational, yet he knew the weight wouldn't be lifted until he had fulfilled his obligation.

Then, and only then, could he sleep in peace.

Wearing a dark suit and overcoat, Keller entered the bank as soon as it opened on the first morning of December. He nodded to the elderly guard who had unlocked the door, removed his fedora in the warmth of the foyer, then climbed the stairs to the main lobby.

Although he had visited this building on many occasions, he was always reassured by its architecture. In his opinion, every bank should be built this way: marble floors, stone pillars, and vaulted ceilings. Everything about the place felt solid, as a proper bank should. Like a medieval fortress or a modern museum. Over the years he had spent some time in the United States and was amazed at the inferiority of its banks. Oftentimes they were wedged into local shopping malls or grocery stores, nothing more than plastic countertops and fake wood panelling squeezed into cheap retail space. Nothing about them seemed safe or secure, which probably explained why the wealthiest Americans deposited their fortunes in Swiss banks.

For peace of mind. And to hide it from Uncle Sam.

Keller smiled at the thought as he strode past the bank tellers, all of whom were locked behind sturdy iron bars, and made his way towards the safe-deposit vault. It was downstairs, nestled underneath the lobby floor. To gain access to the facility, customers were required to pass through security. Ten years earlier, everything had been done with picture IDs and signature cards. Now the system was high tech, like something out of a Hollywood movie.

As he approached the first checkpoint, Keller removed his leather gloves and tucked them into the pockets of his overcoat. Still stiff from the morning cold, he cracked his knuckles then typed his ten-digit, alphanumeric code into the computer keyboard. The hard drive whirred for several seconds before his password was accepted and additional instructions filled the screen.

Knowing the procedure by heart, Keller ignored the monitor and placed his hand on the scanner, making sure his fingers were positioned in the proper slots. Instantly, a beam of green light, which resembled the lamp inside a photocopier, moved under the surface of his hand. Starting at the tips of his fingers, it slowly made

its way towards the base of his palm, analysing the ridge structures of his skin and the nuances of his hand. In a flash, millions of computations were made, and his identity was verified: Louis Keller, age 52.

A split-second later, the electronic lock buzzed in front of him.

Keller opened the door, glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was behind him, then walked inside and pulled the door shut. After double-checking the lock, he turned and faced the marble staircase that led to the vault below. A uniformed guard waited for his arrival.

'Bonjour, monsieur.'

'Bonjour,' Keller said as he pulled out his passport.

The guard inspected the document, compared the name and photo to the information on his computer monitor, then asked Keller to sign the electronic tablet on the security desk. Once his signature was verified, he was finally granted access to the floor.

'Merci.'

Keller nodded politely, tucked his passport into his jacket pocket, and headed towards the massive vault. Made with steel-reinforced concrete, its walls were three feet thick and virtually

indestructible. Over the years he had been tempted to move the contents of his safe-deposit box to a newer bank down the street that bragged about its sleek, modern vault, but after consulting with a structural engineer, he learned that the older vaults were actually harder to break into – unless their locks had never been upgraded. But Capital Savings had spared no expense, installing a dual-control combination lock that worked in conjunction with a separate time lock that denied any access during non-business hours.

Since the bank had just opened, Keller was the first visitor of the morning. A citrus scent lingered in the air, as if the floor had been waxed the night before. Hundreds of brass locks lined the left- and right-hand walls. Several of the boxes were only as wide as a brick; others were much larger. The biggest boxes filled the far wall. A few of them were so massive they looked like they could hold caskets. Keller had always wondered what treasures were hidden within: gold, jewels, stacks of foreign currency. Whatever it was, he knew it had to be valuable because a box of that size cost thousands of dollars to rent.

By comparison, his box was a bargain. It measured two feet by two feet and never cost him a cent since it was financed by the mysterious

trust fund. A long time ago, he had tried to track down the original source of the revenue, but the paper trail stopped cold the same year that his family had taken ownership of the box, way back in the 1800s.

Keller stared at the box wistfully, reflecting on his visits over the years. Then, with a lump in his throat, he entered his combination using the brass dial for the final time.

7 . . . 2 . . . 15.

As the tumblers fell into place, he pulled his safe-deposit key from his pocket and shoved it into the lock. Twisting the key to the right, the metal door popped open with a *click*.

Keller smiled at the sound; a mixture of joy and relief filled his face.

The big moment was finally here.

After three decades of waiting, thirty-plus years of stress and anxiety and sleepless nights, he was about to fulfil the promise that he had made to his dying father.

After all that time, Keller could *finally* breathe a sigh of relief.

But not until he followed the instructions within.

Saturday, 12 December
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Dressed in black, the shadowy figure trudged through the blizzard on the nearly deserted campus. Six inches of snow had already fallen, and three more were expected by midnight, thanks to a storm that blanketed the region. Although the evening's temperature was in the upper-twenties, it felt much colder due to the harsh winds that whipped down the empty streets, pelting everything with ice.

Lowering his head, he continued onward, unwilling to stop despite the tiny crystals that had formed on his hair and clothes. He had lived in the city for several years, so he knew Forbes Avenue was up ahead, and beyond it, his final destination.

Dedicated in 1937, the Cathedral of Learning towers above the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt)

campus. The sand-coloured skyscraper stands forty-two storeys high and contains more than 2,000 rooms. Its steel frame, overlaid with Indiana limestone, is Gothic Revival in design, similar in style to the Palace of Westminster in London and St Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

Simply put, it is one of the most breathtaking buildings in the world.

On most nights, the golden lights on top of the Cathedral can be seen for miles, but because of the snow, he could barely see the building from across Bigelow Boulevard.

Five minutes later, he tramped up the stone stairs behind the panther-head fountain, then stomped his feet outside the main entrance of the Cathedral, trying to clean his dress shoes the best he could. After brushing the ice from his clothes and hair, he straightened his bow tie and pushed his way through the giant revolving door. A surge of warm air greeted him inside the building, as did two female students who were manning the registration table.

'Good evening, sir,' said the blonde. 'May I take your coat?'

The black man nodded as he took off his overcoat, revealing a tuxedo underneath. He wasn't used to fancy clothes. In fact, the last time

he had worn a tux was at his senior prom, nearly twenty years before. But because of the formality of the event, he had promised to wear one. Not that he was happy about it. If he'd had his way, he would have been on the other side of campus – near the building where Dr Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine – settling into his seat at the sold-out Petersen Events Center, watching the Pitt basketball team beat Duke University in front of a raucous college crowd. Instead, his evening would consist of boring speeches, watered-down drinks, and cheese cubes on toothpicks. Or so he thought.

The redhead looked at the guest list. ‘And you are?’

A voice from the side answered for him. ‘That’s the infamous David Jones.’

Jones turned and snarled at Jonathon Payne. Not only was Payne his best friend, he was the only reason that Jones was there. ‘Don’t start with me, Jon. I’m not in the mood.’

Also dressed in a tux, Payne put his massive hand on his friend’s shoulder and squeezed. ‘What’s wrong, princess? Still pissed about the game?’

‘Of course I’m pissed. We’re playing *Duke*.’

Payne shrugged. He wasn’t happy about it,

either. Even though he had played football and basketball at the US Naval Academy, he had been a Pitt fan since birth. ‘Like I told you, the event was planned before the game was scheduled. There was nothing I could do.’

‘But it’s *your* event,’ Jones complained. ‘You should’ve cancelled it.’

Payne laughed at the thought. Five hundred of the area’s wealthiest people were gathered inside for a black-tie gala. The goal was to raise money for local charities and the continued renovation of the Cathedral of Learning. ‘This isn’t the type of event that you can cancel.’

‘Well, the least you could’ve done is asked for better weather. I froze my ass off outside.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘I’m telling you, I had to walk a mile from my parking spot.’

‘Why in the world did you do that?’

‘Because the street outside was blocked off.’

‘Yeah, blocked off for valet parking.’

‘Seriously?’ Jones demanded.

‘Seriously,’ Payne said, laughing. ‘Come on, you should know better than that. Rich people don’t walk anywhere. Especially not in a foot of snow.’

Jones glanced at the two female students, who

were nodding their heads in total agreement. As if only a moron would think otherwise.

‘Son of a bitch,’ he mumbled to Payne. ‘I’m so cold I can’t feel my nuggets.’

‘Well, don’t look at me. I’m not going to feel them for you.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘I should hope not,’ Payne teased. ‘Heck, you’d have to donate a hell of a lot of money for me to even consider something like that.’

‘Knock it off, Jon. I simply meant . . .’ He paused in mid-sentence, realizing there was no reason to explain himself. ‘Which way to the bar?’

Payne pointed to the right. ‘It’s over there.’

‘Thank God. Me and my boys need a drink. Wake me when your speech is over.’

Jonathon Payne was the CEO of Payne Industries, a multinational corporation founded by his grandfather, a self-made millionaire who had gone from mill worker to mill owner in less than thirty years. Payne had shunned the family business as a youngster – opting instead for a decorated career as a Special Forces officer – but returned home when his grandfather passed away and left him the controlling interest in the company.

Although he willingly took over for his grandfather – the man who had raised him after Payne’s parents were killed in a car accident – he wasn’t thrilled about his career change. In private he often joked that business meetings were held in the ‘bored room’, yet he never publicly complained about his obligations. Not only to avoid sounding like an ingrate, but because he realized his current position had certain advantages: like the ability to help others. It was something he had always been passionate about. Even in his former life.

In the past, he had used blades and guns to get the job done.

Now he used his quick wit and killer smile.

As host of the charity event, Payne took the stage in the centre of the Commons Room, a four-storey Gothic hall in the belly of the tallest academic building in the western hemisphere.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he said as he adjusted the microphone to accommodate his height, ‘my name is Jonathon Payne. Thank you for braving the cold and coming out tonight.’

Dressed in tuxedos and formal gowns, his guests turned towards the podium where Payne waited to kick-off his fundraiser. At six foot four and two hundred and forty pounds, he had the

ability to control a room with his physical presence alone. Throw in his charisma and his boyish good looks, and the crowd didn't stand a chance.

'I realize most of you are here for the free cocktails, so I promise I'll be brief.'

Payne smiled as he gazed at the sea of faces in front of him. Normally the great hall was filled with Pitt students doing homework or studying for exams. However, since this was the last day of classes for the fall semester, Pitt's chancellor Mark Nordenberg had given Payne permission to hold his event where it would have the most success – right across the hall from the Nationality Rooms, one of the main beneficiaries of that evening's fundraiser.

'We are standing in the Commons Room, which is a true example of Gothic architecture. The stone ceiling is fifty-two feet high and all the arches are self-supporting. How they built them without steel beams is beyond me.' Payne paused and looked skyward. No matter how many times he had been inside the Cathedral, he always left impressed. 'Amazingly, this entire room was a gift from one man, Pittsburgh native Andrew Mellon.'

Applause filled the room even though Mellon had died in 1937, the same year the Cathedral had

officially opened. Then again, in the history of Pittsburgh, certain names stood above all others when it came to philanthropy: Andrew Mellon, Andrew Carnegie, and H. J. Heinz.

‘As you know, one of the best things about Pittsburgh is the ethnic diversity of our population. Thanks to the steel industry, immigrants from every corner of the world came to our city, looking for jobs. And if you’ve ever glanced at a local phone book, you know a lot of them stayed.’ The crowd laughed at the joke. ‘One of those immigrants was my great-grandfather, who came here from a small town in Poland and actually worked on this building. I never met the man, but according to my grandfather, he had a favourite expression. He used to say, “If America is the original melting pot, the blast furnaces of Pittsburgh provided the heat.”’

Once again, applause echoed throughout the great hall.

‘For those of you who are new to the Cathedral, we are currently surrounded by one of its unique features: the Nationality Rooms. Scattered throughout the first three floors are a collection of twenty-seven classrooms donated by many of the ethnic groups that helped to build our wonderful city. By simply walking down one

of the corridors, you can visit a Greek classroom from the age of Pericles, a palace hall from China's Forbidden City, or a room from London's House of Commons. All these rooms are decorated with authentic artefacts meant to enrich the learning experiences of Pitt students and the thousands of visitors who come to the Cathedral every year to learn more about our city's past.'

Payne stared into the crowd, making eye contact with as many people as possible.

'One of our main goals tonight is to raise money for these rooms. Not only to aid the preservation of the current classrooms, but hopefully to build several more. This is our way of honouring the ethnic groups that helped shape our city and make it the special place it is today. With that in mind, we have representatives of more than forty countries here to answer your questions about the Nationality Rooms and to discuss our amazing plans for the future. Who knows? With a little help from you, that future might begin tonight.'

Amid loud applause, Payne glanced at the crowd one last time before he left the main stage. As he did his eyes focused on a solitary figure in the back of the Commons Room. She

was standing alone, partially hidden behind a stone column and obscured by shadows. Although he could barely see her, years of training told him that something was wrong.

Somehow he knew she didn't belong.