

demon tears

chapter 1
part 1

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To the memory of my friend and mentor

Steve Kammon

CHAPTER I



Solomon's Vessel

Either how canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see the mote that is in thy brother's eye.

- Luke 6:42 (KJV)

Los Angeles, California

A suite at the Four Seasons Hotel on South Doheny Drive, facing West Beverly Boulevard



"Don't have a stroke, Michael," Robert had told him. "It's only an executive suite."

Tilting his head, Michael tried to recall when Bishop Patrick had said that to him. Yesterday? Last week? Michael didn't know.

Bishop Michael Sigovia was confused and uneasy. Yes, the opulence of his hotel suite was disturbing, but that wasn't the problem. To boot, Robert had insisted they each required a separate suite; also disturbing, if not patently offensive, but that wasn't the problem either.

Since he'd arrived, Michael hadn't ventured near the suite's kitchenette, which appeared to have been stocked for a presidential dinner party instead of just one man. It was two days before he felt comfortable enough to use the mini-bar or its beautiful glasses, even simply for water or an occasional soda with ice. He acquired both soda and ice from the machines at the end of the hall.

The bed was delightfully comfortable and always covered with sheets as crisp and white as he'd ever felt or seen. Still, the mattress

was the size of a tennis court. Michael couldn't help feeling guilty at the excess. It made sleep a challenge at times, if not firmly unachievable.

The suite was the largest in which Michael had ever stood, never mind occupied. Three enormous rooms—a living room, bedroom, *and* separate den, sweet grace forgive us, the blatant, fathomless vanity—a lavish kitchenette, marble bath with a Roman-style tub, and two walk-in closets. One closet was so large it could have held yet another giant bed, fully horizontal, loaded with linen, and still leave more remaining space than Michael's own bedroom in Athens.

Michael was surrounded by waste. He wasn't going to use the DVD player or the high-speed data port. The décor taunted him with detail the quality of which he hardly had the sophistication to note, much less appreciate. According to the brochure on the mahogany writing table, the color of the suite's carpeting was 'mauve.' Despite his best efforts, Michael could only see 'purple.'

Darkly stained, ornate, wooden molding framed the walls and ceiling. Double French doors led to a balcony complete with a beautiful, cedar patio set. One of the hotel's tropical gardens graced the view eleven stories beneath him. Michael couldn't see the gardens at the moment, though; the drapes were closed. Thank the Lord of Angels, the drapes were closed.

Don't have a stroke, Michael.

He sat on the monster bed, listening to the wind outside, staring at the lunch he'd ordered from room service, which was untouched and now, he was sure, completely cold. Michael couldn't quite remember ordering it and glanced at the herb-glazed chicken to try to remind himself. The food looked very nice and Michael thought, for perhaps the fifteenth time, that he should eat it. It too was going to waste, his lunch. He really should eat it.

Michael wasn't bothered so much anymore by the suite, or the bed, or the idea that the meal waiting for him on the small table cost twice as much as his shoes. At the moment, he was thinking about the view. Not just his own, though. Michael was also thinking about the view from down the hall, the view from Bishop Patrick's suite.

Even now, during the bright though overcast daytime, with the drapes pulled tightly closed, Michael couldn't get the picture of the gray-clouded midnight sky out of his mind, the midnight sky at which he'd stared throughout every evening during the previous week.

He sighed heavily and gazed down at the carpet; mauve or purple, mauve or purple?

Michael needed to come to terms with a couple of things. Normally, a little quiet time was all he required to get his thoughts in order. He'd been sitting on the bed since well before the sun had risen, though, and all he'd managed to do was consider that he should be hungry, then order some food so he could stare at it.

Admittedly, the task at hand did represent the accumulation of more than three decades of ceaseless effort on the part of the cardinal and his inner circle. Michael was never so keenly aware of the accrual of that time and labor until now. He'd never been so utterly enthralled by where the efforts of his life might actually have brought him. His stress was the result of a little more than that, though. Michael almost giggled.

It had been an enlightening week to say the least. Although, the most significant moment had taken place only fourteen hours ago. Michael couldn't seem to get himself to move past it. Boy, fourteen hours sure seemed like a long time when he considered that he'd barely moved at all. It wasn't a long time, though. It was the wink of an eye. No, not even that. It was the wink of a tick's eye.

Had he showered already? Michael didn't remember showering, but he must have. There was a towel on the floor and he was wearing clean socks. He really should pick up that towel.

Could ticks even wink?

One of the bigger shocks of the week was that Michael had actually bonded with Robert—and Michael didn't even *like* Robert. Actually, no one did. Ever since his unfortunate experience involving the cardinal's entire group of elder bishops—may they rest in peace—Robert displayed something of a fanatic compulsion toward his work that frankly made the rest of the council extremely nervous. After the tragic event, all the other members of the order found it difficult to be around Robert, even once he was released from the hospital and no longer required so much psychotropic medication.

Prior to Cyprus, Robert's dedication to the mission had merely been called 'notably enthusiastic.' After Cyprus—and he was able to take assignments again—Robert was described, however discretely, as 'rather obsessive.' Michael would agree, but whisper, "with the pedal to the metal toward 'clearly neurotic.'"

Robert was bound to eventually call attention to the sect, attention they could certainly do without, especially from the papacy, which was why Cardinal Matine sent him back to the States in the first place. At least, that was why they'd all assumed Robert was sent to the States.

Now though, Bishop Patrick was, truth be told, much worse. Oh, saints absolve us, Robert was much worse. ‘Neurotic’ didn’t quite cover it anymore, did it? Michael was reluctant to use the word ‘psychotic,’ however, strictly for personal reasons.

Michael thought part of Robert’s problem could have been living here in Los Angeles, alone day after day for the past three and a half months, waiting to be sent the tools he needed to continue. He was only human after all. Some degree of mental lapse could only be expected under such extraordinary circumstances, Michael supposed. There’d been, for example, Robert’s creepy, nighttime vigil. He’d apparently sat in his darkened hotel suite each and every night for fourteen weeks, all alone, drinking Scotch and listening to classical music, meticulously scanning the sky over Los Angeles for the demon. Michael could hardly imagine it. All this time, Robert had been sitting and watching alone.

“Every night?” Michael had asked during the drive from the airport.

“Without fail,” Robert had answered.

“Have you seen anything? I mean, Robert, really, how could you even hope to actually see anything? The odds have to be staggering, I can’t imagine. You could sit there for a thousand years and—”

“I’ll see him,” Robert had interrupted. “He’s here, and I’ll see him.”

To make a tough situation worse, Michael’s arrival had been horribly delayed. Had their positions been reversed, Michael wasn’t sure he’d have fared all that much better. If Robert was a touch delusional, perhaps it wasn’t entirely a state brought on only by his own fixations.

Looking back, Michael wished they’d all taken Robert a bit more seriously. He chuckled at the thought, because, looking back, *honestly* looking back, after all that had just happened, Michael wished he’d become a plumber.

He certainly could have arrived sooner. Maybe Robert wouldn’t have lost his mind if Michael had just gotten to Los Angeles a few weeks earlier. Robert’s assertions had been such a surprise, though. No, truth be told, ‘surprise’ didn’t quite butter the noodle; Robert’s assertions were insane, ludicrous, and fanatical.

Michael shook his head, bit his lip. It was hypocritical, wasn’t it? Thinking of Robert as fanatical and ludicrous was hypocritical. His claims should have been considered predictable and important: he’d apparently tracked down the very demon himself. Robert had

tracked the skotos all around the world, finally finding him settled in, of all places, California. Well, ludicrous or not, predictable or not, no one had anything even resembling a plan for that possibility, nor were they very quick to develop one, which made any real efficiency, embarrassingly, beyond them.

Dear God, what had Robert expected? The majority of the council hadn't been on the job very long. Well, all right, seven years might seem like a long time, but then again, we're not talking about being a plumber, though, are we? No, we're talking about being a demon hunter, and where does one look for a rational precedent in that vocation? Hm? Neither he nor any of Michael's contemporaries had been receiving any effectual tutelage, seeing as all the council elders were gone – may they rest in peace.

Although the cardinal himself seemed to be genuinely shaken by Bishop Patrick's claims, he'd nevertheless expected action. Despite that, the rest of the secret little sect had been slow to gather and even slower to apply the resources Robert had requested. Even after all of them were finally back in Rome, the meetings could hardly be called productive. For one thing, the cardinal revealed the amount of funds he'd already been filtering to Robert, which was preposterous and still growing. Michael had felt as though they were all staring at a dam with a torpedo hole in it; everyone knew it should be fixed, but no one did anything, as they couldn't get over the fact it had happened in the first place.

It was suddenly clear to all of them: no one had genuinely expected anything to go this far or, even more fantastic, that any of them would ever actually be called to arms. With the notable exception of Robert, of course. Robert was the only one among them – besides the cardinal, let's not forget about the big guy himself, good gracious, no – who'd personally witnessed the reality of a demon. Up until last night, Michael would have added the word 'allegedly' to that observation, the same way the other bishops did when they discussed the issue; Robert had 'allegedly' witnessed a manifested demon. Things were just a tad different now, though, weren't they?

Michael giggled. Alone and surrounded by pointless indulgence, he had to press his hands to his mouth to stifle his mirth. Yes, certainly, things were just a tad different now.

All of the younger bishops, all four of them, Michael and his three colleagues, had spent years and years studying and traveling and talking and listening and boasting and documenting and lecturing

and hypothesizing, all the while telling themselves that they believed. They'd been rapt in the singularity of their vocations, feeling set apart and haughty, reveling in their almost whimsical responsibilities, which resulted from their incredibly early appointments to the rank of bishop. Michael had been an exceptionally young priest at the time of his recruitment, a mere twenty-eight.

It wasn't until the call actually came, when, by satellite phone, the cardinal had uttered those simple, impossible words across countless miles, that Michael truly considered what he'd been doing with his life had any real credibility. He'd never really—not *really*—believed he possessed any special link to the Church's conception and application of demonology. It was all academic at best, perhaps theoretical, certainly speculative, but never practical, good gracious, no. In his heart, in his secret perception of himself, and even the Church, Michael was a scholar. That was all. He was an intellectual, a professor, not a ghost buster or a demon hunter, sweet grace forgive us, no, how silly.

The same thought, although never given voice between them, had been on the faces of Michael's colleagues as clear as a tongue of flame; they'd never expected to get the call either. They'd never expected to be making decisions and taking actions and working definitively toward what they'd always considered a highly engaging, exotic, all but improbable—if not flat-out unimaginable—aspect of their jobs. None of them ever believed their work would be pulled from the realm of theory and theology to lie so solidly and conspicuously in the realm of reality. None of them had ever, *ever*, expected to get the call. Not *the* call.

Expected or not, though, the cardinal had called and said, "He's found him. Robert found the skotos."

Of course the council was skeptical. Even days after they had arrived in Rome, they still held enormous doubt. They'd never been exposed to anything resembling the bizarre trappings of Robert's investigation. The council's younger members encountered demons primarily through text: fiction, legends, myths, fables, anecdotes, and scripture. Yes, Robert's recounting of the events on Cyprus was accepted as authentic, or at least coherent.

Well, Michael silently corrected himself, in the presence of the cardinal, that was, Robert's story was accepted.

Despite their educations, despite their considerable faith, taking Robert and the cardinal literally had ultimately proved beyond Michael and his peers. Michael was certain he wasn't the only one to have suppressed an occasional smirk. Even sitting in their various

rooms at their various assignments around Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Near East, listening to Matine ramble on and on over the satellite phone about what Robert found, footprints in blood, wind-blown crime scenes, baffling forensic data, and those poor, poor people with the missing strips of skin, even then, who on the council had been able to keep themselves from grimacing, pulling the earpiece away from their face, and thinking *Is he drunk?*

Michael knew the group waiting back in Rome was still smirking. He knew they had extensive doubt, because he'd had it himself. If they'd remotely considered, even for one instant, that Robert actually found the skotos—or the tangible manifestation of *any* such supernatural entity, oh my gosh, good gracious, yes—they'd have been right there on the plane as well, all of them, right next to Michael all the way.

What had they thought they'd been doing all their lives? What had they really thought of the testimonials from so many eyewitnesses around the world, not to mention Cardinal Matine himself? What did they think had really happened to Robert and the lost senior bishops—may they rest in peace? What had they been imagining all this time? Had they secretly believed the cardinal and Robert were no more than educated liars seeking attention, maybe with just a touch of clinical schizophrenia? Had Michael and his colleagues, somewhere in the recesses of their minds, suspected that one day the entire sect would discover some illusive but rational truth?

Okay everyone, I know we've all dedicated a healthy chunk of our adult lives to the authentication and academic documentation of demons on behalf of the Church, but it turns out that the cardinal, Bishop Patrick, and all those people we've interviewed all over the world, were simply under the influence of some very bad mushrooms. Oh yeah, and all the elder bishops weren't actually killed by a demon. As it happens, they died on Cyprus in a house fire caused by some microwave popcorn. Sorry for the confusion!

Michael glanced again at the table where his lunch continued to sit. The vegetables were dried and looking slightly plastic. His glass of ice and soda had become a glass of soda and water sitting in a small puddle of condensation.

Flying to the States, Michael had expected to discover the missing component that would put all of their moderately exciting yet safe lives back into their normal routines. Before he'd landed in Los Angeles, Michael convinced himself he and Robert would simply sit together quietly, rationally review all the information, discover an

overlooked—but vital—element, and all of this turmoil would dissolve like tissue in the rain.

That hadn't happened, though. And now, a week later, everything was different. Everything was different because Michael believed.

Michael believed because he'd seen him. He'd seen the skotos himself.

Don't have a stroke, Michael.