

# Sample Chapters

I dedicate this book to my unpredictable and changing destiny, whose twists and turns have brought me to where I am now.

## Prologue

There is an age-old legend about the four magical stones of the elements - stones that had limitless power, because all of the most powerful elements of the earth obeyed their will. Those who wielded these stones also wielded the most powerful weapon in the world, capable of changing the course of human history.

Red like pulsating blood that runs through human veins, the ruby was able to wield the fearsome and terrifying power of fire. Shining like a crystal, the diamond, like a pure tear rolling down the cheek, could cause and quell the most terrible storms and whirlwinds because it was subject to the invisible power of the air. The hardest stones and the largest rocks, the boundless deserts, the sandstorms, and all the elements of the earth obeyed the enchanting power of the green emerald, glistening like the dewy grass of the morning. And the blue sapphire, as blue as the boundless blue of the sky, ruled over the irresistible element of water, which had the force to sweep away everything in its path.

Although the world could have been subjugated to the power of the stones, humanity was never ready to wield such a weapon. The human's desire to dominate nature and to be the strongest part of this food chain could have caused terrible and irreparable damage. That is why a secret brotherhood was founded many centuries ago. Monk-soldiers were entrusted with the great responsibility of guarding the stones of the elements and ensuring that they never fell into the wrong hands. They called themselves the "Guardians of the Stones".

The Brotherhood forged four gold rings, set with powerful stones and sent them to four different countries around the world. For hundreds of years, the monks protected and hid the stones, but there were those among them who wanted to see this power in the hands of their enemies. There was a long silent war between the "Guardians of the Stones", the hardy warriors

of the monks who protected the secrets of the Brotherhood, and the “Lightbearers”, an organisation whose main objective was to obtain the secret stones and to concentrate in their hands the most powerful weapons known to humankind. Unfortunately, the ranks of the dedicated “Guardians of the Stones” diminished over the years, and the enemies grew stronger and more powerful. The greatest secret was at stake...

## Chapter 1

### Thorne Corporation, Paris.

“I apologise to you all for having to summon you so quickly. In other circumstances, I would not have insisted on meeting at such a late hour, but the matter is urgent and I’m afraid we have no other time to meet”, Nathaniel said to those sitting around the large meeting table.

No one had thought of saying anything to him, everyone knew that if the Great Guardian had already called the highest council of the Brotherhood, the matter was urgent, in fact, nobody ever contradicted him. Nathaniel Thorne was a man in his mid-seventies, but not a man of his years, with a powerful and robust physique, one of the most influential and respected business executives, not only in France but in Europe. Nathaniel had also been the head of the secret Brotherhood of the “Guardians of the Stones” for thirty-five years. Despite his sturdy build and the harsh and commanding tone of his voice, Nathaniel’s face bore the marks of fatigue and sleepless nights. His shoulders were weighed down not only by the affairs of multi-million dollar corporations but also by one of humanity’s oldest secrets, which was becoming more and more difficult to keep. Late on Thursday evening, all twelve members of the Brotherhood’s highest council were gathered on the twenty-fifth floor of the Thorne Corporation’s headquarters. Only a few of them lived in France. Most of them had arrived directly from Paris International Airport, after long flights from the farthest corners of the world, since the urgent call of the Great Guardian left no room for hesitation.

The mood in the meeting room was rather strange and uncertain. Everyone around the table was anxiously waiting to hear what their corypheus would say.

“Friends”, Nathaniel began quietly but confidently, “as I said, I had no choice but to call you together”.

The entrepreneur paused for a moment, looking around the room to make sure everyone was listening attentively. His authority was undoubtedly so strong that no one would have dared to do otherwise.

“Two days ago, I received an unexpected call, and the news I received has caused me a great deal of worry. I fear that our common enemy has come closer than at any time in the lifetime of the Brotherhood.” Nathaniel took a deep breath before continuing, “On Tuesday morning, a land broker was found murdered.” he said, causing confusion among the brethren. Everyone started talking at once and the silence of a cemetery had turned into a Sunday flea market. The Great Guardian sat quietly in the chair at the end of the table and waited patiently for the passions to subside. Everyone was already nervous and tired after their long journeys and the uncertainty of why they had been called. The mediator was the only person, apart from the leader of the Brotherhood, who knew the true identity of the Guardian of one of the rings, in this case the earth elemental ring.

After the first wave of astonishment had subsided, someone in the audience said:

“OK, the news is shocking and of course it is very important, but maybe there has been an accident. Maybe the mediator was just in the wrong place at the wrong time? After all, every second teenager on the streets now carries a gun.” Everyone fell silent again and looked to Nathaniel for an answer.

“Unfortunately, ladies and gentlemen, the wounds found on the body are evidence of a long and exhausting torture”, said Nathaniel, “and I do not want to go into the details of all this, but I will say that the only reason to

torture a person in this way is to extract very important information, or if there is mental instability. I am afraid that in this case both are possible. The people present were well aware of the terrible consequences. Darren, one of Nathaniel's confidants and a long-time friend, rose from his seat and began to speak quietly:

“With your permission, I would like to assemble a battle group (the name given to a group of elite Brotherhood soldiers whose members quietly arranged things so that no one would find out) and start an investigation. Perhaps we can find out who did this and how much they managed to find out?” A murmur of approval went up in the meet room. Darren Bolt was one of the most senior officers in the French Security Department, in charge of numerous military missions in various countries. He was always composed, collected, and decisive. If anyone could put things right, it was him. The overwhelming support apparently led the other members of the Council to think so too.

“Yes,” said Nathaniel standing up, “I want to believe that the mediator has remained faithful to his fraternal vows until the end, may he rest in peace, but we cannot be sure. Even the strongest will can be broken by the use of, how can I put it better... by the right means. Fine, if you all agree and there are no dissenters?” He looked around slowly, giving those who wanted to speak a chance to do so, but there were none. Nathaniel slowly put a tired hand on his friend's strong shoulder and said, “Thank you, my friend, I was hoping you would volunteer for this assignment. Gather the group and leave as soon as possible. You will get the coordinates as soon as you get to the air base.” The men shook hands and Darren rushed out the door

without saying goodbye to anyone. The Great Guardian turned to the others:

“I know you are tense and nervous. It is perfectly understandable in these circumstances. The cars are ready and waiting for you in the underground car park. Everybody go to the hotel, get some sleep and we will meet tomorrow evening. You will have to endure a few days of this. We have a tough job ahead of us, and I am not just talking about the appointment of a new facilitator - I am talking about the fact that our ranks are thinning and the Brotherhood is not in the best of shape at this time. Ok, enough gloom for tonight. Thank you for coming and good night to everyone.” Nathaniel raised and extended his hand towards the door, indicating to everyone that the meeting was over for the day and that everyone was free to go.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Montserrat Monastery. Catalonia. Spain.**

A beautiful and sunny morning dawned. Looking at the blue sky, one could have predicted that another hot day at the beginning of summer was dawning although at this time of the year such weather was common. It would be much more surprising to look up in the morning and see dark, ominous clouds like evil shadows in the sky, foretelling rain and wind. Fortunately, it is the middle of May and the rainy season is still far away. This means the air temperature will rise with each passing day and soon every living creature



will look up to the sky in the hope of seeing those dark harbingers of fresh rain.

Montserrat Monastery has been bustling with life since dawn. After the daily morning service, the monks have been scurrying around the monastery's vast grounds like ants on a giant anthill. Although the monks are usually visited by travellers all year round, the beginning of the warm season is a different story. Millions of tourists from all over the world flock to this place. Every day, the monastery is visited by countless people who turn this oasis of tranquillity into a cacophony of noise leaving behind their litter and the stench of sweat. But despite all this, during the summer season the monks earn money for the rest of the year by selling various handicrafts, olive oil produced in house, and all kinds of herbal infusions with healing properties. As a result, the monks work from dawn til dusk making sure everything is in order before the first groups of tourists arrive. Anyone who has been to Montserrat will confirm without blinking an eye, that it is a place that can amaze even those who claim to have seen it all.

Set among the uniquely shaped, million-year-old Montserrat Mountains, the monastery lies about 45 kilometres north-west of the Catalan capital. It is said to date back to 880 AD, when angels appeared to a few shepherds in a village at the foot of the mountains. Later, an image of the Holy Virgin Mary was discovered in a cave, and. Benedictine monks built four chapels set in the mountains, before the monastery itself was built. Since the 13th century, pilgrims from all over the world have been drawn to the site.

The Monastery of Montserrat though has seen some very difficult times. During 1811 and 1812, it was devastated and completely destroyed by Napoleon Bonaparte's army. Later, the monks were brutally stripped of what little they had and were forced to move out. A few decades later, the monks returned and undertook the arduous work of rebuilding, which required a

great deal of determination and strength, but alas fate was not on their side. Again, the monks were forced to leave their sacred sanctuary during the Spanish Civil War at the beginning of the 20th century. This time, the monastery was saved from total destruction by the autonomous government of Catalonia, and from then on the monastery began to grow rapidly. With the support of the government, the devastated buildings were rebuilt, a new museum was created, and the basilica was reconstructed.

From where the Montserrat Monastery buildings are located, two modern funiculars take visitors to other important and beautiful places including the famous rock called Santa Cova, where an image of the Virgin Mary was found, and to the Chapel of Saint Joan, where you can literally walk in the clouds.

As impressive as the monastery's buildings are, the landscape of Montserrat is even more impressive. Formed over millions of years, the mountains have taken on a rather unusual shape, which is why they are known as jagged mountains. The views are fabulous, even on a cloudy and overcast day. The panoramic views of the mountains and plains are breathtaking. Of course, you should dress a little warmer to be comfortable, as the wind is often gusty and strong due to the altitude being around one kilometre, meaning that it's always much cooler at the top than at the bottom.

The monastery is already expecting the first influx of tourists for the day. As usual, the grounds look immaculate: the windows of the buildings glisten in the morning sun, the flower pots bloom with multi-coloured blossoms, and the cosy shops are lined with beautiful panoramic paintings by the monks of the surrounding countryside. If you didn't pay attention to the people constantly milling around, you might feel as if you were looking at the pictures in advertising brochures that lie scattered on hotel reception desks.

Katelyn had woken just over an hour ago and was in no hurry to get out of bed. As soon as she opened her eyes, she realised that she had missed morning prayers again, but she didn't feel too bad about it. She knew that today, Grandfather Vincent would not have time to deliver a sermon on duty and responsibility to God, to others, and to oneself. But for all that, before leaving the room, Katelyn knelt down beside the bed and said a prayer of apology, consoling herself that it would be an excuse for missing the service.

The room where she lived was on the second floor and to the right of the monks' dormitory. Like most of the rooms in the monastery, it was very modestly furnished, just twenty-five square metres, with a single bed, which was quite comfortable, a two-door wardrobe as old as the monastery, the door of which always creaked very loudly when it was opened, and a tiny desk next to a small window which overlooked the beautiful courtyard and garden. Kate, as she was more commonly known, spent much of her time there, dreaming of one day packing up her meagre belongings and setting off to unseen foreign lands, where she would have many adventures and learn about new cultures. Unfortunately, she considered it to be just a pipe dream. Now eighteen years old, she had spent her entire life at the Montserrat monastery. Of course, she did not regret it, in fact, she loved it and sometimes asked herself that if she could go anywhere at anytime, would she really dare to leave her beautiful home where she felt safe and loved? Her grandfather, Vincent, was a respected monk and the monks took good care of her. From a young age, Kate was everyone's darling and never complained about the lack of attention, sometimes even wishing that everyone around her wouldn't be so nice to her.

She never went to school with other children, but was taught by the monks. Mathematics, history, geography, literature and even physical education were part of her daily routine. She was also taught from an early

age about spiritual development and self-knowledge through meditation, and many hours were spent searching for that inner peace which, as she grew up and became a teenager, became increasingly difficult to find. Despite sometimes missing morning prayers, she was a very diligent and zealous student, and in her spare time she always helped the monks particularly during the tourist season.

Of course, it should be mentioned that nature hasn't spared her good looks either. With her long dark hair falling like silk on her tanned, smooth shoulders, and big brown eyes that her grandfather said she inherited from her mother, the small nose, perfect posture and a firm but shapely, feminine, trained body. It was no wonder that most young men visiting with one of the tourist groups would drool with desire at the sight of Kate. Although many attempts were made, none succeeded in seducing her, for she was too clever and never got caught up in any adventures. The only guy she was willing to spend time with was Geoffrey, a Spanish boy, a year older, sporty and cheerful, who lived in a village not far from the monastery with his aunt and uncle. Like Kate, he didn't know his parents, which may be why they were so close. Geoffrey had visited the monastery from a very young age because his aunt worked there as a cleaner, and the children became very close friends. For two years, Geoffrey had been working as a guide for a local travel agency, taking tourists around the local attractions including the monastery. Kate loved Geoffrey like a big brother and he loved her like the sister he never had. No doubt there was a time when romantic feelings were felt by them both as they grew up and spent all their free time together, but after their first kiss they realised that they were probably not meant for each other and decided to remain friends. They have been friends ever since. Each other's best and only friend.

Kate quickly tidied up her room, not because she liked tidiness, but more because the strict rules of the monastery demanded it. She put on one of her favourite short-sleeved blue dress and went down the creaky wooden stairs to the courtyard. The first tourists, who had arrived a little early, were already gathered chatting loudly, taking pictures of everything around them, and the most impatient were arguing about who would be the first to get on the funicular. Kate saw her grandfather standing at the gate chatting with the guide from the local travel agency who had escorted the first group of tourists. He must be talking about the upcoming tourist season, she thought and ran over to say hello.

“Good morning!” she said happily. She kissed her grandfather on the cheek and nodded her head to the guide standing nearby.

“Good morning, my child. In a good mood today?” Vincent replied with a smile.

“Yes, it’s a great morning, and I’m always in a good mood. After all, you’ve often said that my charming smile helps sell more olive oil.” Kate’s smile beamed even wider.

Grandpa Vincent laughed.

“What is true is true. By the way, young lady, don't think you'll be able to get away with talking about missing this morning's service, so do not drink the day without the evening,” he wagged his finger defiantly. But Kate had already wandered off and said nothing, just turned round and fluttered her pretty eyes.

It was a hot day. For a couple of hours, Kate had been working in the small shop, explaining to tourists who could hardly understand English how and where the monastery’s oil is made, which was available to but there and then. She enjoyed interacting with the different nationalities who came by,

and talking about the monks' ingenuity in making oil or herbal infusions with healing properties. The tourists were also happy to talk to her, and when they were in a better mood, they were eager to tell her about the countries they had visited on their travels and to share their impressions of them. It helped that Kate could easily converse in Spanish, English, German, and French, which was a pleasant surprise for the visitors, many of whom did not miss the opportunity to chat in their own language in a foreign country. Kate loved their stories about the different countries and soaked up all the information like a sponge.

It was getting hotter outside and the shop's air conditioners were turned on to keep the shop cool. Groups of tourists were increasingly looking around for some nice shade to escape the increasingly hot Spanish sun. Despite the heat, the number of visitors to the monastery did not diminish; in fact, you would have thought that all the travellers on holiday in Spain and the surrounding area had gathered here.

"Buenos dias, damas y caballeros!" was heard in the shop. Here's the most handsome, the coolest and the most desirable guy in Catalonia. And I'm ready to kidnap the prettiest girl for a delicious brunch," shouted a young man who appeared in the doorway, one arm raised in the air like a matador who had walked into an arena. Everyone in the shop immediately turned in his direction.

"Geoffrey!" Kate's face lit up when she saw her best friend.

Geoffrey gestured to Kate, "Well, let's go! I've brought the most delicious sandwiches made by my aunt, and I'm going to treat you to these delicacies."

"First of all, a lady like me needs to be invited in a more respectful manner, and a bunch of flowers might make things a little easier," Kate

answered, accepting the rules of the game and flirting lightly. The people in the shop smiled as they watched this little play between friends. And anyway, my break is only twenty minutes away.

“Go on, girl, just go quickly, before you scare away all my customers. I'm sure I can manage without you, and God help me if I have to listen to that rascal for another twenty minutes,” said Brother Austin, who had been looking after the business and customers of this shop for many years, as he pushed the girl from behind the counter. Kate didn't need to be told a second time. She hurriedly grabbed Geoffrey's arm and ran into the courtyard.

“Ah, youth... How beautiful it is to see and remember the joy of our younger days,” said an elderly lady wistfully, while sniffing her herbal infusions in a corner of the shop.

“Yeah... Although sometimes I'd be happy to chain a black man up,” Brother Austin grumbled in response to the woman's comment.

The monk was in his late sixties, with hair as grey as the snow on the mountain tops, of short stature with a slightly stubby nose. He loved the children, but often punished them, because Kate and Geoffrey never missed an opportunity to tease him. At the beginning of last year's tourist season, Brother Austin was the first one to open the shop and put the goods on the shelves. However, when he went inside, he could not find a single bottle of herbs, only a note on the counter: “Goats are sacred animals. If you catch one, you'll have something to sell”. Turning towards the courtyard, the brother saw a goat walking calmly beside the shop, with the bags attached to its back, which later turned out to contain the missing bottles from the shop. The monk chased the goat around the courtyard of the monastery for perhaps half an hour, until the other brothers, having finished laughing, started to help him. It was really funny, but not for Brother Austin. After all

this circus, a few of the monks tried to intercede with the young pranksters, but it did not help. As recompense, Kate had to get up early before the sun came up for a whole week to get the shop ready for work so that all the goods would be on the shelves when they opened, and poor Geoffrey had to come in every evening after work to tidy the shelves, wash the floors and clean the shop windows. That was exactly a year ago, but Brother Austin was always on the alert to make sure the youngsters didn't think of any more mischief.

As soon as they walked out of the shop door, Geoffrey, with a mischievous smile on his face, quickly started dragging Kate towards the inner courtyard of the convent saying, "Let's get going before it starts."

"Not started? What hasn't started Geoffrey? What have you done?" said Kate. The guy didn't say anything, just stepped up his pace. "Geoffrey?" repeated Kate.

"No big deal. I just left a small snake on the shelf among those bottles of oil," he replied with an indifferent look on his face.

"A snake? Are you crazy?" exclaimed Kate, "We'd better go back and get it!" Kate was terrified.

"Calm down. The snake is fake, it's rubber," Geoffrey reassured her with the same charming expression on his face, adding, "but I still think it'll be fun."

"Oh, God!" Kate squeaked, "you do realise it's going to be bad for both of us, don't you? You've got me in trouble, you scoundrel," and she punched him in the shoulder.

"Oh, don't, don't act like a saint here. Last year, in case you forgot, the goat was your idea," her best friend reminded Kate with a caress of her shoulders. "And by the way, we can't let Brother Austin down. He would be



very upset if the season started without any problems,” he added wryly. They both laughed and started looking for a comfortable place to sit down.

The young couple sat down in the undergrowth of a lemon tree that has been there for decades, right under the window of Kate’s room. They would often sit like this, forgetting about time and chatting and daydreaming together for hours, until the silhouette of Kate’s grandfather appeared at the window to the left of the lemon tree, reminding them that it was getting late and time to leave.

Under the lemon tree stood a small double bench, placed there by the monks after their friends had laid the ornamental lawn which they very carefully tended. But despite the young couple’s objections, they still preferred to sit on the ground until the monks finally tired of disciplining them and they were able to enjoy undisturbed rest in their favourite spot. As was their custom, they sat down on the ground and leaned their backs against the trunk of the lemon tree. Geoffrey took the sandwiches his aunt had made out of the bag and handed one to Kate. They ate in silence, enjoying the gentle breeze that occasionally coaxed them out of the sweltering heat. A moment later, a woman’s scream rang out. Kate had a bite of her sandwich in her mouth. Everyone who was in the garden at that time immediately turned in the direction of the scream. A few monks hurriedly ran towards the oil and herbs shop. Kate and Geoffrey looked at each other and smiles appeared on both their faces. Someone had found a snake. Kate could already picture Brother Austin’s face flushed with anger and silently accepted in her mind the consequences of the joke.

“Ok,” said Geoffrey, standing up. “Looks like it’s time to disappear. We are sitting too close to the threat”. He helped Kate to stand as if nothing anywhere was happening, and they quickly mingled into the crowd of people and headed towards the great gates of the monastery.

The commotion quickly died down when someone finally realised that the poisonous snake crawling along the shop shelf was fake and life in Montserrat's anthill was back to normal.

At the main gate of the monastery, Geoffrey gave Kate a quick peck on the cheek and called out as he walked away: "See you later, beautiful! Enjoy the rest of your day!"

"Thank you very much. Thanks to you, it will be a nightmare!" replied Kate. "Don't worry. I'll join the punishment tomorrow!" Geoffrey shouted back and he disappeared into the crowd of people, which, despite the heat, was growing in number. Kate smiled, took a deep breath and, realising what was ahead, went to face Brother Austin. As she walked, her gaze fell on the fountain in the far corner of the courtyard, where she saw her grandfather talking to a strange-looking man. It might not appear odd, since her grandfather was always talking to strangers, but the man looked really strange. Despite the fact that it was about forty degrees outside, the man was wearing a black suit and his posture gave the impression of a very confident and dangerous man. It was the type of man Kate had only seen in the war and crime films that Geoffrey loved so much. The conversation seemed to be at an end. The man in the black suit handed her grandfather what looked like an envelope, shook his hand and quickly walked away. Vincent looked very thoughtful, and even from this distance Kate could see the concern, maybe even fear, on his face. Her grandfather stood there for another moment, then put the envelope in his inside pocket and walked with uncharacteristic speed towards the monks' dormitory. A strange, and not altogether good feeling came over the girl. She wanted to run after her grandfather and find out what had happened, but she heard a voice behind her.

“Do you try to focus before you return to the shop? Yes, kids, you improve every year. Poor Austin will get a heart attack one day...” Kate looked up to see Brother Carlitos smiling broadly. Carlitos was responsible for all the monastery’s financial affairs.

“I don’t know, what are you talking about”, Kate replied with an innocent tone. “Yeah, right”, said Carlitos, laughing, before walking away and adding, “Good luck, my girl, you’ll need it.”