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Introduction

Brother Greg's life is all a façade. As the head Pastor of the mega-church Christian Fellowship Center, life was perfect for a man who desired wealth, power, and influence. Greg achieved all his dreams by only having faith in himself while, at the same time, preaching what his followers wanted to believe. Greg had it all, or so he thought, until his past returned to take it away again. Unexpectedly, he was reunited with his childhood best friend Robert, who recently woke up from a coma due to Greg's actions.

His assistant, Grace, is intelligent, sexy, and too good to be true. She is on a mission unknown to Greg, from her powerful mother and their benefactors, to monitor Greg until he is needed for a future they are not privy to.

Earlier, when he was in a coma, the Archangel Raphael tasked Robert to get his friend Greg on their side against a group of fallen angels.

The key to defeating them is the mythical Ring of Solomon.

They shall transgress, and think themselves

gods ; while evil shall be multiplied among them.

*And punishment shall come upon them, so that all of them
shall be destroyed.*

79 Enoch 9-10

Contents

1. Orphan	1
2. St. Joseph's	9
3. Grace	17
4. The Human Source Code	21
5. Of Templars and Masons	25
6. Confessions	29
7. Senator Cooper	37
8. The Masonic Temple	41
9. Rally @ 50 Yard Line	45
10. History of the Ring	51
11. Olivia	55
12. Sermon on the Football Field	59
13. Old Classmates	65
14. Surprise Guest	71
15. Mother	77
16. Planning meeting	81
17. Politics and the Church	87

18. The Ring	95
19. Naamah	105
20. Harbor Park	113
21. Weapon	121
22. Introductions	127
23. Risky Ceremony	137
24. Important Delivery and First Internment	145
25. Setting the Trap	153
26. Dangerous Confrontation	161
27. Aftermath	169
28. I live among the wreckage of my past choices...	175
29. Showdown on the Capitol Steps	181
30. Another Interment	187
31. Election Announcement	189
32. What is next?	193
33. Cast of Characters	197
Acknowledgements	199
About the Author	201
Other Books By the Author	203

Chapter 1

Orphan

Twenty Years Ago:

It was a two-hour drive to the group home in Richmond, Virginia. Greg spent the time in silence, looking out the window. His eyes were open, but he saw nothing. His social worker, Jennifer Mason, had tried to engage him in conversation. After several attempts, she gave up and remained silent for the rest of the trip.

Greg was old for an orphan. At fifteen, he lost his only parent, his mother, to an unsolved murder in their home, and Family Services didn't find any other living relatives. He had few friends, except for a classmate, Robert Diaz, and a possible girlfriend, Angela Jordan. Unfortunately for the investigators, Angela was one of the dead, and Robert was in a coma. Robert's doctors were unsure if or when their patient would ever wake up. No one else in his hometown wanted anything to do with him. There was a violent incident at a Catholic church called St. Rita's, and some there blamed him for what happened. The pastor and two others died, along with a few parishioners who were seriously injured. The police investigations, Virginia state and local, were fruitless. They had few or no clues. FBI and Homeland Security looked at possible terrorist angles; their investigations were opened and then closed with no report to the public. Greg was the only suspect, but the case was at a dead end with nothing to go on.

Their car exited I-95 and continued along several secondary streets to arrive at St. Joseph's Children's Residential Facility. Several buildings were scattered throughout the grounds. All of them were two-story buildings that looked like large family homes. The facility had one gated entrance off the secondary road. The driveway was about five hundred feet until it branched off, left and right, creating a cul-de-sac. The most prominent building in the middle was where Jennifer stopped the car.

"This is it, Greg. I'll show you inside." He still was in no mood to talk and grunted back. She touched his shoulder and assured him, "It will be alright."

Inside the building, a woman met them in a green polo shirt with the facility logo and jeans, who smiled as she introduced herself.

"I'm Pat, one of the group home assistants. It is nice to meet you, Greg." She looked about thirty, with a slim build and red hair. Greg only nodded. She turned her attention to Jennifer.

"Hi Jennifer, it's good to see you again."

"You too, Pat. Is Mr. Aaron in today?"

Mr. Aaron was the home administrator and the point of contact with Jennifer regarding Greg's case.

"Yes, he is. Please follow me."

Pat led them to an office on the first floor, just a short distance from the main entrance. The group came upon an ordinary-looking door with a small nameplate that said 'Mr. Aaron'. Pat knocked on the door.

"Come in," a deep voice beckoned from behind it.

Inside, the office was decorated with pictures of smiling kids and comfortable furniture arranged around them. A man was seated behind a messy-looking desk. On one side sat a computer monitor, and on the other side, several stacks of papers that looked in danger of toppling over. Mr. Aaron was clean-shaven in his sixties with a full head of gray hair. He appeared to be a man who exercised

frequently, with a lean frame and biceps stretching the sleeves of his polo shirt. He stood up when the three entered his office.

“Jennifer. It’s good to see you again.” He turned his attention to Greg.

“Hello Greg, I am Gerald Aaron, the administrator here. It’s nice to meet you. I am sorry that it is under these circumstances, but I hope we can make things easier for you while you are here.” Greg only nodded. Mr. Aaron gave Greg another moment in case he wanted to speak up.

“Thank you, Pat. I’ll take it from here.”

“Jennifer tells me she may have a foster home available shortly. I hope that is true, but I will warn you the odds are not good at your age. Sorry, that is just my experience. In the meantime, you will stay here, and we will try to make this transition as easy as possible. Do you have any questions?” Greg remained silent. He was still processing all that had happened to him a few weeks ago.

“Can I go to my room now, Mr. Aaron? I don’t feel much like talking,” he mumbled.

Mr. Aaron leaned back in his chair.

This kid looks different from the person Jennifer described last week. She said his close friends blamed him for the deaths at St. Rita’s.

“Alright, Greg, I’m sure you are tired from the long drive.” The administrator said, “Please come with me, and I’ll show you to your room and introduce you to some people who will help you get settled.” Mr. Aaron and Pat escorted Greg to a small room on the second floor with a bed and dresser. Jennifer had already brought his things out of the car and put them on the floor.

“Because you are a little older than most of our kids here, you can have a private room. I hope you will like it, Greg.”

“Thanks,” Greg said, putting his bag on the small bed. The room was smaller than his old one at home and plain, with only one window overlooking a grassy field.

“We will leave you to get settled in. A counselor will come by shortly to help you with your transition here. I don’t know what you have been through, but

we are only here to help. Please remember that.” Mr. Aaron left. Greg went to the window and stared outside.

I can't stay here.

An hour later, Greg heard a knock on the door.

“Come in.” It was Pat again.

“Hi Greg, I hope you have settled in.” She glanced over at the bed, and his bag was still unopened.

It seems he is not settled in yet.

“Would you like to walk around the place and meet some of the kids here?”

“Not really.”

Pat stood in the doorway.

“But I guess you are not here to take no for an answer,” Greg grumbled.

“It’s not like that, Greg. It will do you no good to look out the window all day. Please come with me. You don’t have to talk to anyone if you don’t want to, but I need you to be familiar with the place.”

Greg followed Pat out of his room. There was more activity in the hallway than when he first entered the building. She explained that most of the kids were at school when Greg arrived. Some kids looked to be at least ten or twelve years old. He felt out of place.

“Don’t worry about the kids here; most are easy to get along with. I’ll introduce you to the group at dinner at five-thirty. The food is decent, and we keep a menu near the downstairs dining room.” They passed through a large open room with several chairs and two couches. A fireplace was at one end of the room, and various-sized tables and chairs were next to it. Pat pointed out a round table commonly used for playing board games. A large television was mounted on the wall, easily seen throughout the room.

“Where do the kids go to school?” He asked.

“The county public schools range from elementary to high school. The school bus picks kids up at the entrance and drops them off after school. If you

decide to participate in an after-school activity, that is no problem. We have a van to pick you up when you are done.” Pat was happy that Greg was curious about school.

“OK, just wondering.”

“You don’t have to go to school right away. We can let you settle in first. If I remember right, you will be a junior in a few months?”

“Yes,”

“I have been working on your admission to Prince George’s High School, and you will attend starting this fall. I hope by then you will have acclimated to life here.” Pat realized she was rambling. “Sorry, I talk too much. Honestly, I don’t know how to talk to a kid who is almost an adult.”

Greg looked around the large room; this place was not his home and never would be. But then he had no home to return to anymore; this was it for now.

“Can I go back to my room?”

“I haven’t finished showing you around; there is still more to show you.”

“Please,” Greg held his head down, hiding tears welling up in his eyes. “Later, please.”

Pat sighed, “OK, but just for today. I will come by in a few hours to make sure you get something to eat. OK?”

“Sure.”

At six in the evening, Pat returned to take Greg to the dining room. He had made some progress in unpacking. He emptied his bag and moved his bed closer to the window.

“I am glad to see you have begun to unpack.”

“Yeah, I was looking for something in my bag anyway. So I put some of my clothes in the dresser.” Greg motioned with his head.

“Good, I hope you are hungry. Dinner is ready downstairs, and you might also have the chance to meet some other kids.” Pat smiled.

Greg shrugged and followed Pat out of his room.

The dining room was a little chaotic. Kids were loudly talking to each other between bites of food. It painfully reminded Greg of the school cafeteria at home.

I guess this is home now. I'm never going back to that cafeteria again.

There was an ache in his chest. He always ate lunch with Angela in the cafeteria. Pat noticed the change in Greg's face.

"You, OK?"

Greg shook the thoughts away.

"Yeah, I'm not very hungry. But I should eat something now or not eat at all. I guess."

"That's not true. Something is always available until late evening, even later on the weekends." She waved at one kid in the room. "Jorge; he is a year younger than you and has only been here for six months. Let me introduce you to him."

"Jorge, this is Greg. He just got here. Jorge volunteered to show you around," Pat said with his hand on Jorge's shoulder. "Jorge, do you have time now?"

"Sure. Nice to meet you, Greg." Jorge extended his hand.

Greg shook it reluctantly. "Nice to meet you, too."

"Well, I'll leave you guys to get acquainted. I will catch up with you again soon." Pat left the two boys alone.

"Let's get something to eat. We can grab a tray here, and the line starts over there." Jorge pointed and picked up a tray. "The food is not so bad here for a cafeteria, and there are refrigerators where you can grab a snack or drink most of the time." Greg and Jorge both grabbed a slice of pizza and a soft drink. They found an open table near the window. Greg was hungrier than he realized and got a second, then a third helping. After finishing his third pizza slice, he slowed and looked out the window. Outside was a large grassy area that looked well cared for, and behind that, rolling hills covered in trees.

"Not much beyond the trees."

"What?"

“You’re looking outside, and there is not much past the trees. We are in the sticks; I have yet to hear anyone get as far as the trees. Besides, do you see the fence just ahead of them?”

Greg hadn’t noticed it earlier, but a tall chain-link fence was before the tree line.

“They are eight feet high and have cameras.” Not very homie, if you ask me. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a downer. They usually keep you busy here so you don’t get bored.” Jorge finished the last bite of his pizza and washed it down with a Coke. “Do you want to go to the game room?”

“Not right now; I think I will go back to my room,” Greg said.

“OK, suit yourself. I will catch up with you later?”

“Yeah, sure,”

Back in his room, Greg felt angry, but at what, he did not know. He thought of his friends and then Bezale, feeling abandoned and used. Somehow, a new inner strength that he had overlooked before pushed down those emotions.

I will survive this and show them all.

“So, how is he doing?” the Stranger asked as Jorge entered his room.

“Fuck! You scared me,” Jorge jumped, not expecting anyone in his room at this hour.

“He will be OK. You can trust me to look after him as you asked.”

“That’s good to know, and I will keep up my end of our bargain as well.” the Stranger looked around the room. “So, is his room much like yours?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” he said, running his finger over the windowsill, “remember, keep an eye on him while he is here. I have ensured he will not leave this place for the next few years.”

Jorge’s eyes opened, “what about me? I mean, you told me I would be reunited with my brother soon.”

“A few years go by quickly; trust me. Time is funny; a year for a mortal is like a second to someone like me.” The stranger’s icy smile froze Jorge’s heart.

“Are you thinking of altering our agreement?”

“No, no,” Jorge stammered.

“Excellent; just keep an eye on him, and I’ll check back with you whenever possible. I will update you about your brother in time.”

“Yes, thank you.”

The stranger evaporated, and Jorge cried.

Chapter 2

St. Joseph's

Two years passed, and Greg settled into a routine at St. Joseph's Children's Residential Facility. Since Greg was one of the oldest there, he had limited privileges. When Greg received his driver's license, the facility offered to pay him to run the occasional errand. The depression Greg felt when he first arrived evolved into smoldering anger and resentment toward his former friends. Blaming them for his current situation rather than his choices was easier. His memory of what happened at St. Rita's was still fuzzy as if he was trying to see through opaque glass. Only bits and pieces of that time flashed across his mind, and he was unable to grasp them firmly. However, he still remembered the fallen angel and rationalized that his friends should have understood why he had to obey it. They should have offered condolences at being put in an impossible situation.

Greg had just returned from an errand for Pat when he saw Jorge at the front entrance. The two boys had become friends the past two years, and Pat even allowed them to use the facility's car to go out to the movies or mall occasionally. Greg enjoyed having a friend again but still kept a distance from Jorge. He never told him if something bothered him, not like he did with Robert. He would never again allow himself to have friends that close again. Friends would all eventually abandon you one day.

He parked the car in a spot reserved for the facility vehicle and then returned to his room. He wanted to finish an assignment for school early so he could go out with Jorge later. There were only six weeks left until graduation and then off to basic training in the Army. Greg was looking forward to it because, for the first time, he would be on his own. He just finished his assignment when someone knocked on his door.

"Can I come in?" it was Jorge.

"Door's open."

Jorge walked in and sat on Greg's bed. "Still doing homework?"

"No. Just finished. You ready to go now?"

"Yeah. I finished my stuff earlier today. I was in the game room a little while ago, but the games are boring, so I hoped you were ready to go out."

The center had many games, even video games, but the boys had already played and now were tired of most of them. At least when they went into town, the mall had an arcade with newer games. The problem was it cost money.

"Do you still want to go to the arcade today?" Greg asked, putting his school books away.

"No. Low on funds today." Jorge groaned, falling back on the bed.

"That's no fun."

Jorge sat up quickly. "I have an idea!"

"What?"

"Remember Kevin in our class?"

"What about him?"

"He said that he was having a party at his house."

"I didn't get an invite, Jorge." Greg shook his head. "I'm not going to a place I am not invited."

"True, he didn't invite us, but that girl Nicky told me I should come. She's good friends with him."

"So second-hand invites are ok?" Greg laughed, "Sure, why not."

Jorge stood up. "I'm sure it will be ok. You always seem able to talk other people into doing what you want. It's a gift of yours."

"Or a curse."

"What?" Jorge shoved Greg's shoulder. "You know you easily persuade people into doing what you want, so you should share that talent with me."

"Are you certain Nicky would want us to go? She is friendly with all the guys at school." Greg winked.

"What? Bullshit!"

Greg grabbed his jacket and wallet. He wanted to go out anyway, "Ok, let's go."

"I'll meet you in the car. I need to get some things anyway."

Jorge went to his room to collect some of his belongings. "Hello, Jorge."

Jorge saw the dark outline of the Stranger silhouetted in the window of his room.

"Shit! Stop surprising me like that." Jorge's heart rate always spiked in his presence.

"It is amusing to me that I can still startle you. We have been talking together now—for what? Two years now. Oh, no matter; I am just checking in with you about our *friend*. Are there any fresh revelations?"

Jorge had grown tired of these 'chats' because the Stranger would never tell him exactly why he needed to watch Greg. He would merely say it was important to him. In exchange, he had promised to reunite him with his brother one day.

"He has said nothing new to me about that night at St. Rita's. It's hard to ask him about it since he is defensive and tells me to shut up. You already know he resents his old friends there."

"Yes. I know that much already. I want to know why Greg has gaps in his memory," the Stranger barked.

Jorge involuntarily stepped back. The Stranger never got angry with him before. "I can't make him remember things he says he doesn't remember."

The Stranger's face softened, "Of course not. You are only, as they say, human."

"There is one thing I could do, maybe?" Jorge said in a timid voice.

"What is that?"

"Well, you know he is due to graduate soon and join the Army."

"Yes, so?"

"I told him we are crashing a party at a schoolmate's house tonight, but it is actually a going away party for Greg. We planned to have a beer keg and, of course, girls from class." Jorge's voice sounded hopeful as he told the Stranger about the plans. "I can get him drunk and get him to tell me everything. You know, as a 'we are never going to see each other again anyway' kind of confession?"

"Confession? Amusing Jorge, go on."

"I can say something like I may never see him again, and could he just open up about his past, etc." Jorge was trying to sell his plan. "This may be the last time I can get him to talk to me, and when he does, you can help me with my brother."

Beer can loosen his tongue.

"Do it; if it works, you will see your brother."

"Thank you."

Greg and Jorge drove up to a large house in the nearby town of Hopewell. The party looked like it was already underway.

"Are you sure we will have no problem getting in?" Greg said.

"Trust me, buddy, you know most of the people here. A lot of them voted for you in the class council elections. I didn't think you had a chance until you gave that speech the day before the election. I had never seen something like that before. You had them eating out of your hand, and you won." Jorge patted Greg on his shoulder.

Greg smiled at the memory. He was never popular at his old school. Greg's speech in front of this new class was effortless. He didn't know what changed since moving here, but he had a way with people he never had at his old home. He was shy and unpopular there; he was just another mediocre student no one would miss. He became famous in his current school, especially after making that speech. But the shy and unconfident kid was still very much within him. Greg parked the car in front of a house with all the lights on. The shy boy inside him just wanted to drive away.

Jorge opened his door. "Come on, dude, what are you waiting for?"

Greg could see no backing out of this now and followed Jorge. The house was loud, packed inside by Greg's classmates. It was nearly the end of the school year, and they were blowing off steam; at least, that was the excuse. An enormous banner hung on one of the walls with a message: **'Good Luck, Greg!'** At the far end of the room, Greg saw Jorge talking to Nicky.

How did he move so fast through the crowd?

A painful slap on his shoulder got Greg's attention, "what's up bitch?" It was Pete from the football team, and he was already sloshed. "Not a lot, just got here," Greg said irritably. Pete was not one of his favorite people, but with class politics, you tolerate the football team, at least.

"So I hear you are joining the Army after school? Why the hell would you do that?" Pete slurred.

Damn, his breath reeks.

"Gotta start somewhere, and I can't afford college, anyway."

It was an honest answer and maybe the only real thing he had ever said to the drunk meathead.

"Cool, cool. Well, I see Becky is winking at me. Later, nerd!"

Greg didn't see Becky, but he was glad to be rid of him. He felt a cup forced into his hand.

"Here, amigo, drink up." Jorge smiled.

"I don't really..."

“Dude, don’t be like that after we drove all this way, and Nicky wants to talk to you.” Jorge elbowed him. “You need a little social lubrication, anyway.”

Greg downed the cup in a few swallows of the cheap beer and soon felt the effects as he got a second cup. The two boys mingled among the kids in their class and some people who were not from their school. Greg eventually ran into Nicky. “I am glad you came, stud.” She was already drunk. She was wearing jeans that were so tight on her that he wondered how she got them on in the first place. A white button-up sweater that was unbuttoned halfway down, leaving nothing to Greg’s teenage imagination. “When are you leaving for the Army?” She slurred her question.

Greg was about to answer when she kissed him, pulling him close. The rest was a blur, and eventually, they ended up in a bedroom.

Later that night, Jorge was looking for Greg.

Where is that guy? I hope he is more talkative now, for my sake and my brothers’ sake.

Just then, one of the girls from class, Jorge, who never gave him a second look, grabbed him and said, “Up for a game?”

Greg woke up in his underwear the following day, and Nicky was gone. Luckily, he found his clothes nearby.

Damn, what a mess.

The room looked like a tornado had hit it; things were off the walls, and anything not heavier than furniture was on the floor. He got dressed and began looking for Jorge. After a ten-minute search and stepping over some of his classmates who had passed out across the floor, he saw Jorge asleep, sitting on a chair, snoring loudly. Greg punched him on the shoulder. “Wake up, stinky.” He could smell the beer on him, “did you bathe in beer? How will we get you back to your room smelling like this?”

With a crooked smile, Jorge said, “Totally worth it.” giving a thumbs-up sign.

The boys sneaked in through one of the back doors, for which Greg had a key. He asked Pat for one when he had the car keys. They each went to their rooms. Greg entered his room without incident, but Jorge was not so lucky.

“Hello Jorge,” the Stranger said.

Jorge almost wet himself.

“So, were you able to talk to Greg like we discussed earlier?”

“Not exactly. Too many people were there, and I couldn’t get him alone to talk to him.” Jorge stammered.

The Stranger leaned in a little, and his nose twitched. “You smell of beer and... women.”

Jorge felt a warm liquid running down his leg. His legs gave out on him as he sat on the floor.

“I see. I will have to help you somehow to remember what I expected from you.” The Stranger appeared to grow larger, and a fetid odor filled the room. The room grew darker. He felt the Stranger’s hand on his head, squeezing it painfully. Suddenly, the door of his room opened.

“What the hell is this smell...” Pat walked in, nose wrinkled. She saw Jorge sitting on the floor, the tall Stranger standing over him.

“Who the hell are you?” Those were the last words Pat ever said as she was thrown out into the hallway, cracking the sheetrock walls before she slid to the floor, her lifeless eyes wide open.

Afterward, the police investigation was brief and at a dead end, with no leads or clues about what happened. Pat was dead. The medical examiner’s report said it was from multiple spine and skull fractures. The mechanism was unknown. Jorge was alive but in a coma, so no answers would come from him soon, if ever.

A few days later, Greg was on his way to Army basic training, never learning the outcome of the police investigation.