

Kevrinek

The prologues.

Although it may be unusual to dwell on prologues, one of which precedes each book in the **Kevrinek** series, I'd like to make it clear that these books are **not** historical novels as such, but the premise has roots in fifteenth to sixteenth century England, a time of huge political and ecclesiastical upheaval, leading up to the final Dissolution of the monasteries.

It's a fascinating period of history and the prologues are a composite part of the overall story rather than just background. As such, I hope you'll enjoy looking at the sequence in isolation from the main book stories.

The prologue in each book dovetails with events in the main story. It occurred to me that because the order isn't sequential –prologue one, for instance appears at the start of Book 2, Chamber of the Dead – I thought to put all four in one document, if only to record the story in chronological order.

My intention is that the sequence will help readers to appreciate the requirement for such an elaborate hiding place at Chy Nans, or "The Retreat" as it was known at the time, the intention being to convey a sense of urgency as the inevitability of Dissolution grows ever closer, the ultimate decision of Henry VIII to finally strip the monasteries of their wealth and power, shaking the very roots and structure of the Kingdom to the core. The four prologues can then be seen almost as a separate story, underpinning the **Kevrinek** series, which has one further book, "The Renaissance Factor" at the 'mind-factory' stage.

Mike Anthony

Sequence

Prologue one	1499	Book 2 Chamber of the Dead
Prologue two	1531	Book 1 The Homecoming
Prologue three	1538	Book 4 The Penkevil Connection
Prologue four	1539	Book 3 Kingdom of the South

The first Prologue

THE RISING STORM

In pre-history, possibly at the end of the Ice-Age, a subterranean river had carved a tunnel to the Atlantic, or Oceanus as it was once known, finding outlet on the north coast of Cornwall. Over centuries, surface erosion and ground clearance would have taken its toll on the tunnel roof, surface or shallow mining for tin also contributing to the collapse of tunnel sections. Softer rock between the hard granite would have meant that damage could be minor, and hence repairable. Maybe construction of "The Retreat" itself could have contributed to the deterioration process. But I have contrived to think not.

Whether a fortuitous coincidence or a major factor in the selection of the site for building, the semi-exposed underground river cave presented a unique opportunity. At this time, the considerable wealth and power of monastic houses across Europe was under threat, the desire to 'withhold' items of fiscal and spiritual significance from the greedy gaze of the Crown, in the form of Henry VIII, considerable.

This is simply the 'take' my imagination has contrived to present me with.

*Prologue one links with the first discoveries made beneath Chy Nans, as is named in the twentieth-century story. In Book 2 '**Chamber of the Dead**' we therefore have the river tunnel, repaired and ready for discovery some 450 plus years later.*

The second Prologue

THE SHADOWS APPEAR

*Abbot Reeve endures an uncomfortable journey to darkest Cornwall journey in 1531 at the start of Book 1 '**The Homecoming**', his task being to deposit items of immeasurable value from one of the great monastic houses in the caverns below 'The Retreat'. The 'Great Wall' is nearing completion although even someone as important as the Abbot is denied access, strict instructions from the Bishop creating tension and resentment. Jon Penryn makes a similar journey some 450 years on, across the snowy wastes of Bodmin Moor, encountering a mysterious lady who will play a big part in his life over the coming year.*

Later, his subconscious mind drifting back from 1979, Jon witnesses the procession of candle-light as the Abbot makes his way from the deep woods towards the ghostly silhouette of “The Retreat” centuries before. In his dream, Jon can go no further and remains unaware that the river tunnel even exists. His mind rests with Kerensa ... for now.

The third Prologue

CLOSING THE NET

*Desperation and a sense of deep loss engulf Lady Penkevil as she seeks solace at the gates of Bodmin Priory in 1538. Caring not for her own safety, she is resigned to meeting her maker, there to be reunited with her beloved Thomas, her one request being that two items are secreted at “The Retreat”, there to rest until order is one more restored to the land. One such item finds its way into catacombs deep in the lower tunnels, the other brings Jon and Iso together, the coincidences surprising, the discoveries even more so. Book 4 ‘**The Penkevil Connection**’ draws episodes in history together, Late Medieval overlapping with the Renaissance, Victorian with the twentieth-century.*

The fourth Prologue

THE DAY HAS COME

*Just a few weeks later, in early 1539, the fatal day, anticipated with a deep sense of dread and grim certainty, has arrived. The final act of Dissolution falls upon “The Retreat”, officers of the King drawing the curtain with chilling finality. And yet, in the course of their duties, a vengeful act of savagery serves only to preserve the very treasure they seek to find. I seek to convey the horror and finality as the power and influence of the monasteries is brutally extinguished in Book 3 ‘**Kingdom of the South**’.*

The fifth prologue

THE RECKONING

*Book 5 ‘**The Renaissance Factor**’ will bring news from the turbulence of Rome, seeking to reconcile the Penkevil connection with the mysteries of **Kevrinek**.*

ALL FOUR PROLOGUES IN SEQUENCE

Prologue 1

The Retreat, North Cornwall, England October 1499

‘Move away, she’s falling’ cried an urgent voice, as the ox stumbled, one rear leg sliding backwards on the muddy slope, causing its huge frame to freeze momentarily, then collapse sideways. Too late, the man who’d shouted lost his footing as he scurried to escape, falling face down, any discomfort he experienced when his face met the sharp granite scree overwhelmed as the full ten hundredweight of the beast descended on his body, the sickening crunch as his frame disintegrated making even the most-hardy onlooker wince and gasp in disbelief.

Staggering to her feet, the fall having been cushioned by the extremely thoughtful monk, the ox rejoined the team unscathed, her colleagues still holding the massive granite slab in place, the ropes taut, a shocked silence reverberating around the scene. Now coaxed back into position, the beast stood ready to contribute to the task once again, oblivious to the carnage she had so recently created.

The lifeless body of the monk lay crushed, his ribcage and internal organs compressed beneath a crumpled habit, dark red blood and brains oozing from the remains of his skull, a spear of granite protruding through one eye-socket, the eye-ball surprisingly intact, rolling away in a rivulet of muddy water.

‘Shall we delay the capping process?’ asked one of the men, his anxious voice intimating that it would be an appropriate gesture to their flattened holy brother.

‘Much as I would dearly wish to do so,’ replied the Dean, looking away to hide his discomfort, ‘the task must be completed. The team are in place. There will be time to grieve later.’ His face was grim, tinged with regret. This was only the latest of many casualties sustained over the course of the three-year venture but, he hoped and prayed, the last.

The remains of the fallen man were dutifully covered and focus returned to the mission ahead. Once more the oxen took the strain, steam rising from their sweating bodies, mingling with a veil of Cornish mizzle that soaked everything more thoroughly than heavy rain. In normal circumstances, the four beasts would have dragged the capstone into place quite easily,

their combined body-weight being almost double that of the weather-sculpted granite slab, but the nature of the slope made the process far more difficult.

The Bishop was anxious to retain as much as possible of the scrubby undergrowth that clung to the steep hillside between wizened, gnarly hazel and Cornish elm, all of which had contrived to knit itself into labyrinthine patterns, the intention being that this would soon cover any remaining traces of activity once the project had been completed. The old, subterranean river would then be fully enclosed once more. For now, the gurgle of fast running water, a dozen feet below the surface, emanated from the hole, eager to make its way to the ocean.

The Bishop's directive had made maneuvering the six huge stones all the more difficult, but this was the last and largest, dragged over the course of several days from a stretch of moorland a few miles down the coast towards Mount Hawke. With heads bent low, focus on the task helped blot out the horror of their brother's demise as the men urged the oxen forward, each seizing a rope, the gesture contributing little to the process yet affording a degree of satisfaction to their souls.

Slowly the huge capstone eased up the slope, inches at a time, any slight stumble by the oxen causing understandable anxiety. Clouds of breath from the men merged with a spectral steam surrounding the oxen, creating a ghostly expression of toil. With one final heave, the gleaming granite cap came to rest over the very last opening into the network of tunnels that stretched away in an irregular pattern under their feet. The grinding squelch ceased, now replaced by an uneasy silence.

'Hold firm,' rang out the command. 'Unharness the oxen.' Within seconds, the ropes fell slack, the men slumping down on the wet ground, gasping, concern over their fallen brother flooding back. The moment was significant, and yet the culmination of so much exertion over so many months was drenched in sadness at the very moment of triumph.

'Be so kind as to deal with poor brother Bernard,' asked the Dean of two monks, turning then to the mason in charge of the project. 'I am going below. Complete the seal and report back to me when you have done so.'

With that, he strode up the path towards the recently completed building, wiping the insistent dampness from his face with a cloth, grateful that his work here was almost finished. The desire to return to his comfortable lodgings in Bath was considerable, a luxury he had not enjoyed, apart from on one brief visit, for many months. This final chapter, a pivotal moment in an irksome yet crucial undertaking, required his absolute and uninterrupted attention. He'd barely reached the door into the building when he swung round abruptly, displaying undisguised

irritation. A sharp voice had demanded his attention, the man's tone showing little concern for authority.

'These were found at the lower entrance' the other man said brusquely, holding two wretched figures by the scruff of their necks, whilst inclining his head towards the distant buildings in the valley below, just visible through the haze of misty rain. 'There's no doubt they've been into the tunnel. They had tools with them. What do you want me to do?'

It was clear that the men had already been subjected to rough treatment, blood running from the nose of one, the other clutching an arm, wincing with every movement. Two pairs of scared eyes flitted between their captor and the Dean, escape a desire but not a probability.

'That is your domain, Matthew,' replied the Dean calmly. 'The enterprise must not be compromised. You know my thoughts. Join us later, after Compline. We have things to discuss.'

Without another word, he turned and entered the building, traversing the long staircase that led past the crypt and into the caverns below, a series of flickering oil lamps casting ghostly reflections at his movement along the passageway. Footsteps echoed loudly as he walked with purpose through the oppressive gloom. As he approached the lower tunnels, the sound of running water greeted his ears, the hot, stale atmosphere mercifully replaced by one of cool dampness.

Masons and workers in the tunnel had witnessed the eclipse of the final orb of daylight, their underground world gradually reduced to muted candle-light. As the Dean approached, they turned and joined him, staring silently up to where they assumed the hole to be. The very fact that nothing could be seen answered the obvious question, the only evidence that the stopper had been put into the bottle being a scattering of debris, small stones and earth, on the pathway before them. The Dean nodded with grim satisfaction.

'Now your work begins in earnest,' he said, a selection of heads nodding in the gloom. Carefully chosen for the skills they possessed, the twenty men - a combination of disaffected miners, stonemasons and talented journeymen - had already begun their work and now felt completely at home in the equivalent of an adapted mine-shaft.

Some were Cornishmen, smarting from the indignity of a rebellion crushed two years earlier. Others had arrived by boat from Wales, Ireland and the north. None knew the real purpose for which the caverns were required and knew better than to enquire, such requirement having been made clear at outset. They were forbidden to leave the site until the project was completed, at which juncture they would be rewarded with sufficient income to allow a

comfortable existence for the rest of their days, the promise of eternal life thereafter clinching the deal.

The natural cavern carved out by the river had been restored, its watercourse once more subterranean, the ceiling which had been partially damaged by tentative mining exploration over centuries intact once more. Now the tunnels stretched through softer stone towards the newly completed Retreat. Many hundredweights of sandstone needed to augment the internal construction of the new tunnels, had been transported by shallow draught balingers using the cove below the site. These vessels, used for coastal trade, were crewed by as many as forty men, employing oars to negotiate the tricky access to the cove. No one was allowed to leave the landing place for fear of compromising security.

A relay of carts ferried the cargo through the dark valley known as Kevrinek, past the temporary monastery buildings and up the slope that lay below the Retreat. Mostly lowered down through the last remaining opening into the cavern, left for just such a purpose, much of the stone then made its way up the network of tunnels towards the building, the remainder taken to the front of "The Retreat", destined for the crypt and underground chapels.

Already, four side catacombs had been excavated, the longest disappearing over one hundred feet into the solid rock, piles of rough blocks stacked and ready for the eventual sealing process.

The intensity of the day had faded, the broken remains of brother Bernard now resting in a rough coffin within the recently completed lower chapel. Four men sat around a rectangular oak table in the main hall of the Retreat. Two huge wrought-iron floor-standing candelabra, each holding twelve candles stood either side of the table. Combined with the flickering light from a substantial fire in the massive fireplace, their faces were both visible and expressive.

The Prior of Bodmin, a slender, stooping figure, thin white hair clinging on to a domed head, with rather more peeping out from his ears than dwelt upon the scalp, looked across the table at Dean Burgoyne. The Dean possessed a sculpted face with a square jaw below a fleshy mouth. Two intense deep-set dark eyes glowered beneath a hedge of black eye-brows. Equally dark, dense hair worn in a pudding basin style to ear level with the front cut away, gave the impression that he was peering through the proscenium arch in a theatre, the furrowed brow beneath being the audience. His black habit could have been designed specifically to match his bodily features, hanging in loose folds, suggesting a lean figure appropriate to his calling.

The remaining two men gave every impression that a life of piety and penitence was not under consideration. The pretext of wearing a habit couldn't disguise the fact that they were hired henchmen, employed by the Dean to enforce security and drive the workforce to complete

the project on time with a minimum of upheaval. Both of substantial build, the rough habits did little to conceal the un-monk-like bodies that lay beneath, their demeanour one of confident arrogance, the uniforms a token attempt to integrate them into the team of monks assigned to the project.

‘The two wretches you brought to me,’ asked the Dean in a low voice, ‘they have been dealt with?’

‘Conclusively. ’Tis the first incursion for some while and I doubt we will see more now that the outside work has been completed,’ replied one of the men, picturing the bodies that now lay at the bottom of the marsh below the slope. ‘Do you require us to maintain the same level of security now the tunnel is complete?’

‘Most certainly,’ was the instant response. ‘Your zeal has been commendable, Matthew. No more cargoes of stone are required and most of the work yet to be done is underground. I feel it prudent, however, to remain vigilant until the Retreat is fully safeguarded. The consignments we expect are likely to arrive gradually, over years perhaps, so security becomes even more important, although the nature of your operation will be, shall we say, more compact and therefore easier to administer. What say you, Prior?’

‘I agree completely, Dean, but leave it entirely to you. Your wisdom in such matters has proved to be faultless,’ he replied smoothly, refilling the goblets with fine French wine provided by the Bishop, many bottles of which still resided in the cellar, supply hopefully destined to outlive completion of the venture.

‘Let us raise a toast to Bishop King and his ...generosity,’ suggested the Dean, the wine drained and the goblets replenished further.

‘The enterprise has turned out to be even more satisfying than I imagined at outset,’ he continued, a large slice of cheese finding its way to his wooden plate. ‘Although I consider the Bishop to have been slow making the decision to construct this ... depository. It’s widely known that Bishop Beckington suggested such a course of action over thirty years ago and the potential of the site had been identified even earlier, shortly after the original buildings were constructed, I understand. When exactly was that? Do you know?’ he cast a look across the table.

‘Around 1420 to 1430 I believe’ replied the Prior. ‘Records are rather sketchy.’ He seemed aggrieved that he didn’t have a precise answer to hand.

‘But I think the timing was right,’ added a gruff voice from the relative gloom at the far end of the table.

‘By that, Rowan, you mean the rebellion, for want of a better word, that drove a Cornish army up to London?’ said the Dean. ‘It did suit our purposes admirably, but I know little of the root cause.’

The Prior seized the moment, leaning forward in his chair. ‘It all started, apparently, when King Henry suspended the privileges of the Stannaries. The Cornish Stannary Parliament was chartered by King John in 1201, and then King Edward gave tax concessions about a hundred years later.’ He was pleased to redeem himself, compensating somewhat for his lack of reliable information about the site. Matthew, his back to the fire, knew a good deal about the rebellion and cut the Prior’s discourse short.

‘The Prior is correct. Henry overturned the terms of the charter about three years back, when he decided to increase taxes to fund his war against the Scots. ‘Tis said that he has offered to restore the privileges of the tin miners in return for a huge sum. I know not the details.’

‘That must have caused resentment but ... a rebellion?’ asked the Dean in astonishment.

‘Oh yes, that was the end result,’ said the Prior, once again grabbing at the chance to shine, ‘incited by a couple of zealots ... I remember not their names.’

‘Michael An Gof and Thomas Flamank,’ said the gruff voice, now back in charge of the conversation. ‘They say fifteen thousand marched from Cornwall, eventually getting all the way to London, only to be cut to pieces by Henry’s army at Deptford Bridge. Hundreds were killed before they surrendered, or so I heard.’

‘Flamank was a local man, a lawyer I understand,’ said the Prior. ‘Both he and Gof were hung at Tyburn and the remnants of the army crawled back to Cornwall broken in body but, apparently, not in spirit,’ he added, shaking one finger, indicating there was more to come. ‘Just a year later, you will recall an attempt by Perkin Warbeck to seize the English throne?’

‘Hadn’t he claimed to be one of the Princes who were locked away in the tower and, presumably, killed?’ said the Dean, a generous piece of cheese impeding his delivery.

‘Precisely,’ said the Prior, growing in confidence all the while. ‘The Cornish, aggrieved, we suppose, at Henry’s treatment of them, rallied behind Warbeck. Once more the Cornish army was on the move but this time it all petered out around Taunton, the ringleaders executed and, once again, the remains of the army crawled back to Cornwall.’

‘And what became of Warbeck?’ asked the Dean.

‘It is said that he is in the Tower, having tried to escape more than once. Word is that he will be executed,’ said the gruff voice.

‘The advantage in this for our cause has been that we have had at our disposal a good many skilled and hugely disaffected craftsmen who have been only too glad to hit back, as they see

it, at a King who has wronged them whilst, at the same time, receiving substantial recompense for doing what we ask of them with no questions,' added Matthew, who had been largely responsible for recruiting a trusted workforce with the help of his reliable contacts in Cornwall.

'Add to that the blessing I bestowed upon them,' beamed the Dean, 'assuring that their passage to heaven would be greatly eased should they agree to participate.'

'I accept the reasoning behind a requirement for such an establishment,' said the Prior, 'but it seems that the deadline for its completion has been brought forward significantly of late.'

'The Crown has been greedily eyeing the wealth of the monasteries for a considerable time,' intoned the Dean. 'Unreasonably so, considering that we bear a burden of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the entire nation.' The raised hedge of eyebrows confirmed his sense of indignation. 'It is possible, nay probable, that his precarious financial position will precipitate the requirement to raise money from whatever source he can identify, the monastic houses being a prime target. The Crown seems not to appreciate that we are mere custodians of what, in many cases, are items not of monetary worth but of spiritual significance.'

The Dean's diatribe at such injustice was gathering pace. 'Surely we therefore have a responsibility to take whatever measures as are necessary to preserve such items. I fear they may be treated with scant respect should they be seconded by the Crown. It is our solemn duty and privilege, hence the requirement for our venture.' Thrusting out his chin, he looked around, seeking approval.

Rowan's sardonic smile was partially hidden in the moving shadows cast by the swaying candle-light. He thought little of the spiritual arguments that had been used to persuade workers that their passage to eternal happiness would be enhanced should they decide to employ their skills appropriately.

'I suppose the spectre of the end times was particularly effective in buying allegiance,' he said with a degree of scorn, causing the Dean to splutter into his wine goblet.

'Mock at your peril!' the Dean responded, 'John tells in the Book of Revelation of the significance of the year 1500 by way of the phrase "half-time after the time". Am I wrong to prepare souls to embrace the end of the world as we know it?' The Dean held out his hands, inviting agreement.

'As you feel so strongly on the matter, pay me a year in advance. I'll settle for gold and let my soul take its chances,' Rowan said with a low laugh. 'And if you are convinced that the end times are upon us, you will have no use for such riches, so why not entrust them to me now?'

'You are amply rewarded already, Rowan,' replied the Dean. 'Now, not a word more. I will pray for you, my son.'

Matthew, fearing the conversation was getting out of hand, returned to more practical matters.

‘We must remember that the Warbeck issue is said to have cost the Crown around thirteen thousand pounds. You can see why it was necessary to move our plans forward,’ he added, pouring yet more wine for them all.

‘Indeed so’ said the Dean. ‘I understand that treasures, books, relics ... ah ... valuables, shall we say, are, as we speak, making their way from a number of the great monastic houses, mine included, for safe keeping in this most exceptional location. Tomorrow, we check progress in the tunnels. Construction of the great wall is well underway. This is crucial.’

The following morning discovered the same four men standing on a small landing adjacent to the cellar of the Retreat, looking down a short flight of steps to the tunnel, an opening at the bottom of the steps leading to a basic but functional chapel. Part of the opening into the main tunnels was covered by what appeared to be bare rock, such was the skill with which it had been constructed.

‘You refer to this as the great wall, Dean, yet the span covers barely fifteen feet?’ enquired the Prior.

Without looking at the man, the Dean explained. ‘Great, in this instance, refers to its significance, not its size’ he replied cryptically. ‘This wall marks the entrance to the tunnels from the building and must, therefore, be built in such a way that it appears to be natural rock. You can see how the strata of the rocks mimics that of the surrounding wall.’ As he spoke, they descended the steps and stood by the remaining opening.

The gruff voice of Rowan, in charge of work underground, elucidated on the necessity for such a structure.

‘The intention is that, should anyone penetrate thus far into the building, the impression must be that this wall marks the full extent of the tunnels. The chapel,’ he indicated to his left ‘is there to appear to be the purpose of the tunnel. The main wall will be over twelve feet thick and give all the appearance of a rock-face.’ The pride on his face held no suggestion of smugness, just professional satisfaction. ‘There has been talk of a concealed entrance to the tunnel within the chapel but, personally, I feel that would be difficult to integrate. We shall see,’ he said, now leading them along the low tunnel the Dean had travelled the day before, emerging into the higher cavern adjacent to the river.

‘Does all seem solid on the sections we have covered, Rowan?’ asked the Dean. ‘No more casualties I hope.’

‘All appears safe now,’ Rowan replied, peering up to the roof, just visible in the light of a hundred candles and oil lamps, the smell of which was mercifully wafted away by a constant breeze. ‘We lost two men, as you know, when the river rose a week or so back. A huge surge of water appeared suddenly after heavy rain and swept them off down that tunnel.’ He pointed to the opposite side of the river, where a low passage sloped away steeply. ‘We think it empties into the marsh,’ he added.

‘But no sign that the repaired sections have been compromised?’ enquired the Dean, a shower of fragments falling at that very moment, making him move back swiftly to the wall, peering anxiously at Rowan’s unruffled face, noting the selection of scars and scratches that adorned his cheeks and forehead, a close-cut bright red beard almost certainly concealing more.

‘That’s as bad as it’s been for a while now,’ replied Rowan, unfazed by the occurrence, his faint amusement at the other man’s reaction enveloped by partial shadow. ‘It is but settlement, nothing more. Otherwise, all is well. Have no concerns.’

Dean Burgoyne turned to the other three, deciding that this latest adventure underground would, ideally, be his last. He couldn’t imagine how anyone could tolerate the cloying atmosphere day upon day, with all the risks it entailed. But then, these men had had been specially selected for their skills in mining. They knew and accepted the dangers, the package of promised rewards no longer uppermost in their minds, pride in their craft taking priority. Calling the team together, rather more men appeared from the darkness than he had expected, gathering in an untidy half-circle beneath the final capstone.

‘Thank you for the zeal and application you have shown. The standard of your work is exemplary,’ he intoned, a faint echo coming back to him, yet another shower of dust and rocks descending, as if in response. He suddenly became keen to cut the discourse short.

‘I shall leave you in the capable hands of brother Matthew, who will inform you of any further requirements. May God’s blessing be with you, and remain with you, as you complete your worthy undertaking. Your devotion to the cause will have been noted by the Almighty, of that you may rest assured.’

Followed closely by the Prior, Dean Burgoyne strode purposefully along the sloping tunnel, anxious to breath fresh air, the stagnant, oppressive atmosphere now eating into body and mind in equal measure. A substantial lunch and a flagon of wine would contribute to his recovery, his appetite for this far outstripping his waning zeal for a project that had dominated his attention for so long.

Several carts, some travelling for many weeks, made the tortuous journey to Cornwall over the following five years as the initial phase of concealment was completed and the tunnels sealed.

Within ten years, Henry VIII would succeed to the throne, setting in motion a chain of events that would lead to the final Act of Dissolution.

The caverns beneath the Retreat remained sealed for some twenty years but once more, events would precipitate the requirement to break the seal and access the secret underworld, there to preserve more treasures from the monasteries for posterity. But this time, the threat would be accompanied by a solid air of finality, the process punctuated by a sense of urgency bordering on panic, the final curtain destined to fall, with no compromise. Above the dark, silent labyrinth of The Retreat, a new world order was to be established, treasures from the past resting, waiting.

Prologue 2

The Retreat, North Cornwall, England, November 1531

Abbot Reeve pulled the cloak tightly round him and sank deeper into the nest of blankets he had, reluctantly, grown accustomed to over these last five monotonous days. The charm of the association had started to fade almost before he had covered a mile, and his desire to vacate this living hell was tempered only by the non-negotiable vow his Bishop had required him to make. The Abbot was to proceed with all haste, travelling only under the cover of darkness, to a remote location in Cornwall, there to deposit for safe keeping irreplaceable manuscripts from the Abbey library. Such delivery, he was assured, would greatly enhance the passage of his eternal soul at the 'Rapture'.

The journey had proved to be untroubled but painfully slow and, for some time now, he had reasoned that the 'end times' could well be preferable to this seemingly endless torment. The previously vile weather had now moderated, mercifully rain no longer penetrating the makeshift covering of the wagon. Under a clear, star speckled sky, a bright moon pierced through the darkness of the deep woods erratically.

'Surely we must be close' muttered the Abbot in frustration as the cart lurched, a residual douche of icy water seeping through the leaky canopy. It was to be assumed that someone in

his entourage was better informed than he regarding their destination. With no beaten track to follow, it had fallen upon the outriders to identify the most likely course to take through this seemingly endless warren of tangled trees that pressed down over the damp labyrinth.

Not for the first time, he silently questioned the dubious honour bestowed upon him by the Bishop. The blessing that preceded his departure was hardly adequate to compensate a man of his position for the indignity he had endured on the journey to this God-forsaken place. The *signum crucis*, executed beneath the relative warmth of his fur, did little to change his opinion, but satisfied any challenge to his eternal soul.

At last, a muted cry indicated clear ground ahead where the terrain fell away sharply. The wagoner was now struggling to stay in control, his cart sliding alarmingly on the muddy ground, the Abbot's concern for his precious cargo suddenly outweighed by fears for his own survival.

With consummate skill, the driver reassured the horses, arrested the slide and successfully engineered the cart clear of the trees, drawing the team to a halt and awaiting instructions. Abbot Reeve sighed wearily, climbed shakily to the ground and gradually extended his body until he stood as upright as his tortured frame would allow, relieved that the outward mission was almost complete, although at what cost to his constitution only time would tell.

Ahead, the forbidding outline of what must be "The Retreat" drifted in and out of sight as clouds scurried across the moon. One solid pinprick of light, glowing steadily from within the ghostly silhouette, confirmed that they were, indeed, approaching their destination. An answering candle lantern was coaxed into operation, remaining alight as they moved forward. Heavy cloud gobbled up the remains of the moon as the two flames moved ever closer, converging in darkness some ten minutes later at a point equidistant from the thick woods and the silent building, now obscured in deep shadow.

'My dear Prior,' said the Abbot warmly as the man before him lowered his head to kiss the proffered ring 'it has been many years since I first made your acquaintance, at Glastonbury if I rightly recall. We meet again in grave and uncertain times.'

'Indeed Father, it is with sadness that such measures as we contemplate are necessary,' replied the Prior softly, 'but please come to the house. You must be in need of refreshment.'

Turning, he led the small procession on the short journey back, the wheels crunching on the stone driveway, the sound echoing loudly through the still of the night.

'The brothers who accompanied me are completely to be trusted, both in their devotion and discretion. The Bishop advises me that the fidelity of brethren in your service is beyond

question,' whispered the Abbot gravely, as he alighted outside the wide stone porch of "The Retreat" and peered up at the grim façade of the building.

'Of this you can be assured,' replied the Prior.

'I am sure you will have been advised of the singular character of the items we bear, if not specific details.' He glanced at the cart and the Prior nodded solemnly.

'The very fact that an Abbot would undertake such a journey would indicate the delicacy of your mission. As you say, I know not the precise nature of the contents, but the very fact that the Bishop would send someone as highly regarded as yourself is sufficient for me to appreciate the significance of the consignment' he replied, holding the other man's gaze, noting the superior look flattery tends to encourage.

'Indeed, my Lord Bishop found it necessary to appoint me with the task of ensuring safe passage' intoned the Abbot gravely. 'Until such time as the sealed caskets are safely stored, I must insist that there be constant vigilance. I trust you understand?'

The Prior lowered his head in confirmation.

'Pray join me in my chamber when you have made yourself comfortable. There, we can discuss matters in complete secrecy. You must have suffered greatly on the journey' His visitor said nothing, but grimaced silently at the recollection.

Less than thirty minutes later, the Abbot, having refreshed himself and abandoned the clothes that had been his constant companion for so long, climbed the long stone steps to the Prior's chamber. Such exertion proved to be an unwelcome challenge for weary legs, carrying, as they did, the considerable bulk of a man who relished the wondrous delights of his abbey kitchen. The prospect of a hearty meal was the one image that sustained him.

He was breathing heavily by the time he was welcomed into the dimly lit chamber. The Prior motioned him to a chair at the table close to the fire, the sight of a bowl containing warm pottage stew doing little to lift his spirits after such a climb. Coarse bread, hard cheese and a tankard of ale contributed nothing to the culinary adventure although, out of politeness, he deigned to sample a little of the stew. The Prior, his taste in victuals being less sophisticated than that of the Abbot, ate heartily, his influential guest taking the opportunity to clarify his requirements.

'I feel sure you will know that the King has now been endowed with the title Supreme Head of the Church,' he said solemnly.

'Indeed,' replied the Prior. Despite a chunk of bread hampering diction, the essence of his reply was clear.

‘It is believed that Parliament may be required to ratify this in due course’ continued the Abbot. ‘Certain Bishops have decided to take steps to safeguard holy relics, and other items of importance, should the monarchy decide to follow the example set on the continent. It is not necessary for you to know details. All I require is your discretion.’

The Prior, with an air of authority above his station but, as it transpired, with justification, wiped his mouth, rose from his chair, placed two logs on the fading fire and turned to face the Abbot.

‘Father,’ he said firmly, ‘pray forgive me for interjecting and, in advance, for my forthright manner, but we have been prepared for such an eventuality for a considerable time. In the light of recent developments, the Bishop has requested, in strict confidence, that the security and expansion of our unique facility has been given the utmost priority. What I have to say may pre-empt some of your questions and perhaps allay any concerns you may have regarding our role in this unfortunate but necessary procedure.’

He took three strides across the room, opened a small closet and returned to the table with a squat glass bottle. The Abbot was encouraged to see dark red fluid filling the two goblets that had also made the short journey. He drank slowly at first, then more deeply, an air of satisfaction gracing his countenance for the first time in several days.

‘A fine French wine,’ he said.

‘A small token from the Bishop.’ The Prior smiled, intercepting the Abbot’s next question. ‘It is with humility that I need to explain the small part we play here in the bigger scheme of things, namely the precautions required to preserve key elements of our faith in these uncertain times.’

He replenished the goblet to quell the inevitable enquiry.

‘By “faith”, I refer to holy books and sacred items used in the course of our contemplations, not the underlying beliefs that live within us.’ The Abbot nodded, comforted by the wine and happy for the Prior to continue.

‘The site has been developed over the last hundred years or so’ said the Prior. ‘The amenities available at “The Retreat” have convinced a number of major monastic houses to entrust us with items of practical and spiritual value, safeguarding such treasures in the event of unrest.’

‘Such as we are now experiencing,’ cut in the Abbot, ‘and it will only deteriorate further I fear.’

‘Precisely,’ replied the Prior. ‘The dire circumstances we envisage cannot have been anticipated when work here started. However, it was not difficult to adapt the storage spaces

when it became clear that measures might need to be taken to preserve what we consider important to our physical and temporal lives.’

‘Our brothers in Germany, Denmark and Sweden have seen property confiscated,’ said the Abbot ruefully. ‘Martin Luther, once a friar himself, orchestrated changes to how clergy and monastic orders operate there.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ replied the Prior, ‘and here in England, the King seems set on religious reform although, as yet, not as extreme as that which we are witnessing on the continent. It is said that he champions the views of Erasmus and More. However, he is spoiling for a fight with Rome and the concern is that, should he not get his way on certain matters, he could consider focusing his attention upon the wealth of the monasteries. It is vital, therefore, to take such precautions as are deemed necessary to preserve our ... heritage, shall we say.’

‘I fear troubled times lay ahead,’ said the Abbot gravely, ‘pray tell me of your ... arrangements here. Where, exactly, do you intend to store the inestimably precious items I have brought with me?’

‘Again, I beg your forgiveness,’ said the Prior, lowering his head, ‘but I am unable to reveal or discuss precise details as to the character and intricacy of our arrangements. Not to you, nor to anyone without express authority from the Bishop himself.’

The Abbot's face became cold and blank. Although he could see the sense of what he was being told, it did not sit well with his considerable pride. The Bishop had not trusted his Abbot sufficiently to confide in him the secrets of "The Retreat".

Now that the delicate subject had been brought into the open, the Prior was intent on completing the task allotted to him with all haste. He bowed to the Abbot, and spoke with some urgency.

‘If you will excuse me Father, it is imperative that I arrange storage of the treasures you have brought to us. You are at liberty to oversee the unloading but, once the items move beyond the inner doors, I must request that you entrust them entirely to our care.’

‘As you wish. My brothers will assist with you,’ replied the Abbot curtly. ‘I will retire to my chamber and leave you free to dispense your duties.’ He rose to leave.

‘Pray take this with you Father,’ said the Prior, proffering the half-full bottle of wine, ‘it would be a pity for it to go to waste.’

The Abbot gave him a penetrating look, still unable to come to terms with the perceived injustice that enabled such a man to become privy to secrets above his station. He accepted the wine as if it were his right and took his leave, the look of haughty disdain challenged by the

steep, irregular nature of the stairs. More than once, he stumbled, clutching desperately for the stone groove that served as a rail, his aplomb recovered with some difficulty.

After a moderately comfortable night where, mercifully, horizontal sleep was available, he now contemplated the long return trip with little joy. At daybreak, he bid the Prior a lukewarm farewell. An inward groan escaped as a loud sigh when the huge door swung open, revealing light snow. Although relieved that his unsatisfactory task had been dispensed, the prospect of a tedious journey back to his warm lodgings, bore down upon him heavily.

The cart meandered slowly along the track, jolting wildly as it met rising ground, the faint chink of glass causing him to examine the depths of his nest of blankets. Discovering several bottles of French wine, the Abbot anticipated the purgatory ahead with a little more relish, one final glance back discovering "The Retreat" disappearing beneath a veil of mist.

The Prior watched from a window as the faint lantern inside the cart disappeared from view into the thick woods, his mouth set in a thin line beneath a broad, furrowed brow.

‘Are the caskets now at the lower levels,’ he asked, turning to a monk standing silently in the shadows.

The man nodded.

‘Very well, instruct the stonemasons to begin sealing the first cavern. I will be there directly.’ With that he turned and walked slowly, but with purpose, along the corridor and down the steps leading to the cellar, a single candle casting long shadows as he made his way deep underground, his focus entirely upon the task ahead.

Prologue 3

Bodmin, England. Winter 1538.

‘Let me wait here for you m’lady, I prithee,’ pleaded the man, as the small covered wagon came to a halt outside the gates of Bodmin Priory, the imprint of wheels on the track behind swiftly consumed by snow that fell silently, relentlessly. Edward Penhale anxiously studied his mistress’s face as sturdy calf boots carried her down three slippery steps into ice, mud and snow in equal measure. Hoping for the slightest glimpse of reassurance, he noted nothing that might afford solace to his troubled soul. In deference to her, he rarely expressed an opinion. It was above his station to do so, and yet the depth of his concern compelled him to override protocol.

‘Surely we can make you safe somewhere m’lady. It distresses me to see the sadness in your eyes.’

Stretching out a slender hand, already blue with cold, the woman placed it on Edward’s shoulder. After twenty years of service, he recognised the kindness as she spoke, submerged, as it was, beneath the rawness of a voice torn apart by torment, grief and the agony of irretrievable loss.

‘Edward,’ she whispered ‘I will be in good company here. Pray return to your family and take them from Cardinham. There is little time I fear, so make haste.’

Her request, though gently conveyed, carried with it an element of command, a faint smile encouraging the directive to be obeyed. With one final glance, returned by a steely gaze, the servant duly coaxed the pony forward with two clicks of his tongue, pulled the hood of the thick woollen jerkin further forward and guided the carriage slowly away into the dark wetness of the winter night.

‘My Lady!’ gasped the monk as he opened the wicket, swiftly beckoning her inside, then peering anxiously along the lane before closing and bolting the small doorway. Clutching a well-worn leather bag, and a box tucked under one arm, she was ushered into the relative warmth and uneasy silence of the Prior’s chamber. Two candle flames danced as she entered, casting ghostly shadows, an air of nervous tension assaulting her senses. The monk followed close behind, bearing a large rectangular object covered with cloth, placed it on the table and departed swiftly, his disquietude undeniable.

‘Lady Penkevil,’ intoned the Prior, rising from his chair in surprise. His voice conveyed concern with only a semblance of cordiality. Taking a step forward and inclining his head, he sought to redress such disrespect, summoning a less-than-convincing smile that further confirmed the anxiety he had expressed.

‘Forgive me,’ he said warmly ‘my greeting was ungracious.’

She inclined her head, acknowledging his response, at the same time noting his uneasiness. The same feeling of dread, to which she had been accustomed for so long, seemed to have journeyed with her from Cardinham.

‘My dear Prior, your demeanour makes me believe that the time is closer than any of us imagined,’ she remarked. ‘I came to beg shelter, but it seems that events are moving even more swiftly than I anticipated.’

The Prior slumped back in his chair, lifting his head after a few moments and looking his patron in the eyes.

‘Forgive me my lady. I pray ceaselessly that our Lord will intervene, yet the helplessness I feel is now embodied in fear for your safety. The King’s Officers were expected earlier today but are, presumably, delayed by the weather. I can find no words of comfort, Lady Penkevil. Even now, we plan to leave for “The Retreat” within the hour. I fear discovery here will not bode well for you. We would be pleased to offer you shelter there. It would allow you time to consider a course of action, even though ‘tis but a temporary solution.’

Her response was immediate.

‘You must do whatever your conscience tells you, Prior. I appreciate your kind offer, but I have lost everything I love in the name of our faith. I doubt if I will see my children ever again, and I fear my Thomas has paid the price for challenging a King whose vengeance threatens to erase all trace of our family and home.’ Pausing whilst regaining her poise, she drew the Prior’s attention towards the objects that had accompanied her. ‘You have enjoyed our patronage for many years. I ask for no thanks, but ask only that you pray for my soul as I shall pray for yours. Please remove these objects to a place of safety. I understand “The Retreat” to encompass such capability. Pray assist me, I wish to write a short letter.’

The Prior scurried across the room, returning with paper and quill, suppressing a feeling of panic, expecting to hear a loud rap on the door at any moment. Having conveyed her thoughts to paper, Lady Penkevil opened the box that lay on the table and placed the two sheets on top of the book within, passing it to the man solemnly.

‘I beg that you seal this box with utmost care and secrete it so that, when order is returned to our land, it may be of comfort to others.’ By pulling the cloth from the larger object, she revealed a painting, clearly a portrait of herself.

‘Though ‘tis but vanity, mayhap this can serve as a reminder of our connection with this place and one which future generations may enjoy.’

‘These will be treated with care and respect my Lady, but I beseech you yet again, leave with us.’

‘No,’ she replied firmly, smiling at the man’s troubled face. ‘Should God grant me safe passage, I head for Altarnun, the home of my cousin. After that ... who knows?’

‘But that is on the far side of the moor,’ cried the Prior, ‘and I have but one cart, already loaded for our departure.’

‘I will make my own way,’ she replied steadily, ‘and trust God will show me kindness in my hour of need.’

The man implored her to change her mind and leave with them but the decision was made, the die cast.

Rosamund Penkevil walked confidently from the Priory gate into the darkness, catching her breath as the blizzard tore into her face. Within a few minutes, numbness had the effect of quelling all pain. She slipped and stumbled for a full two hours, the track leading her past the turning to Cardinham, a bright glow forming an orange halo lighting the sky away to the south. Officers of the King were already savagely carrying out Cromwell's instructions, as her husband had feared. She prayed that Edward had returned in time and that he and his family were seeking safety elsewhere. Rosamund wept icy tears for her children, Agatha and Charles, the vision of their faces when she last saw them - leaving for St Mawes - clearly etched in her mind. Praying fervently that they were now in the south, away from danger, she knew her prayer to be answered, a warm feeling of certainty piercing the coldness like an arrow. She could see the children now and smiled, knowing that the Penkevil legacy lived on in them. The track, barely discernible in the snow, led her to a rocky plateau above the ancient settlement of Temple. Curiously, the platform was devoid of snow, a white curtain on all four sides.

Exhausted, yet strangely euphoric, all her fear and sadness melted away, to be replaced by a glorious vision of perfection. Knowing that her time was approaching, a feeling of power surged through her body, the splendour of the heaven they had championed shone down, illuminating a dark and angry world and, in a blinding flash, Thomas stood before her, smiling. Arm in arm, they walked together into the light ... and there was no more pain.

The small cart, carrying three men and such valuables as had remained at Bodmin rumbled along the narrow lanes, through deep, silent woods towards the coast. Huddling together for warmth, their thoughts were colder than the driven snow, each of them knowing that the end was near, the certainty of dissolution merely delayed ... but for how long? There was work to be done, sacred objects to save for future generations. Many such journeys over the last few years had resulted in treasures from a dozen monastic houses, small and great, being concealed within the labyrinth below The Retreat. Yet no other journey had been accompanied by such an air of finality. The picture of Rosamund Penkevil and the box containing her last letter made their way towards the deep valley of Kevrinek.

Prologue 4

The Retreat. Cornwall. England. January 1539

The rhythmic rumble of horse's hooves approaching at speed invaded the crisp silence of a frosty November morning, growing steadily louder and more insistent, before moderating as three horsemen prepared to dismount outside the grey façade of "The Retreat". With an ominous creak of leather and the sharp clank of metal on metal, the thud of boots echoed menacingly through the icy stillness.

Three grim faces confirmed the enormity of the task. Warm breath, combined with chill air, transformed their low whispers into a halo of spectral mist, mingling with a damp cloud, already billowing around the sweating horses, the beasts' flanks trembling from the exertion of being driven relentlessly from Bodmin.

Moving with purpose along the loose stone pathway towards the entrance, each man was resolutely focused on the task ahead, that being to fulfil the requirements of the Act of Suppression...The Dissolution. Rapping extravagantly on the broad oak door, a strident command rang out.

'Open, in the name of the King.'

Inside, three men awaited their fate. Barely a month after the closure of Bodmin Priory, John Tregonwell, the commissioner appointed by Thomas Cromwell, had instructed his officers to locate, visit and strip bare "The Retreat", hidden deep in a secluded valley above the unforgiving Cornish Atlantic coast. On this bitterly cold winter morning, they were ordered to forcibly confiscate all property and goods therein for the crown.

Kneeling side by side in the main hall, the smouldering remains of a log fire somehow symbolic of their thoughts, two monks and the former Prior of Bodmin prayed silently together, steeling themselves for the inevitable inquisition that would surely end in death or torture, or both.

This routine invocation would, were it not for the visit they knew to be imminent, have been conducted below in the crypt or the small chapel, where isolation better served to concentrate the mind.

Fearing that a tardy response when summoned would almost certainly antagonise their visitors, the proximity of the hall to the main entrance had been considered a more appropriate location for morning prayers. The familiar text was delivered mechanically, with little enthusiasm, and scant expectation of the miracle they all yearned for.

This pivotal moment had not been unexpected, the sharp blows on the door somehow creating a surge of relief. The lingering sense of foreboding, that had plagued their thoughts for many long months and years, could now find release. Hardly a moment to cherish, but at least the torment might, finally, be at an end.

In truth, each of them knew well that this moment signalled the end of the world, as they knew it, a sheltered calling that each of them, and the Prior in particular, had known for most of their adult lives.

The process and intensity of dissolution had been building steadily for some years and, whilst the outcome was not in doubt, the terror that gripped the men in this moment shook their resolve to the core.

Each considered they were prepared for the curtain to fall, the most they could hope for being a merciful end to the precariousness that had threatened the very bedrock of their faith for so long.

The Prior nodded towards the two young monks, looking kindly on their innocent but terrified faces. Approaching his seventieth year, it was reasonable to assume his time on this earth was limited, whereas a lifetime lay ahead of his brothers, their future now, sadly, shrouded in desperate uncertainty.

The younger of the men rose to his feet, took a deep breath and shuffled the short distance to the entrance. A further, louder, insistent thud of a fist hammering on the broad oak door echoed around the stark interior of the building, a sense of dread coursing through his body. Reaching up to release the metal door bar, a warm rivulet of urine snaked down his leg, a tightness in his chest making him gasp as he bent to slide the bottom door latch across.

The instant he had completed the task, the door was thrust open, the knights pushing their way roughly inside, admonishing the sorry creature for the delay, brusquely demanding that all persons within were to make themselves known with all haste.

The requirement fulfilled; all three men now stood before the officers awaiting their fate. Solemnly, the well-rehearsed, official proclamation was dispensed in ringing tones.

‘We hereby confiscate this building and its contents in the name of the King, demanding that you make available all items of value, great and small. Conceal anything at your peril. My Lord Cromwell has warned that any instance of concealment will be deemed an act of treason, punishable by death. We will search the building thoroughly, but it would be advisable should you direct us to where such goods may be stored.’

‘There is little of value to declare, my son’ said the Prior softly. ‘We lead a humble and penitent life, with no need for worldly goods. But please look where you will and, of course, take whatever you may find.’

Two of the knights immediately began to search the ground level, tearing open cupboards and ripping down drapes and tapestries, should they contain or conceal items of value, pulling up rugs and knocking on panelling, hoping to identify hiding places. The kitchen was ransacked, crockery and pots crashing to the stone floor, anything of potential worth, metal objects in particular, forming a random pile in the centre of the main hall.

Throughout this initial search, the remaining knight eyed the monks with considerable distaste, appearing to take pleasure from the discomfort this afforded them, his clear intent being to coerce them into complying with his demands. Circling them slowly, his eyes burrowed into the back of their heads, his boots clicking loudly on the stone slabs with monotonous intensity. Eventually, he stopped in front of the Prior, an enquiry betraying more than a hint of quiet menace as he addressed the man.

‘And you are?’ he asked slowly, moving closer, pulling back the cowl roughly to reveal an expressive countenance, with anxious blue eyes sunk deep into an expressive face, any suggestion of fear or concern within concealed beneath a benevolent exterior. Raising his chin, as if to generate courage, the reply was gentle, but firm.

‘I am Richard, former Prior of Bodmin.’

The knight contemplated the steady gaze returned by the man, disappointed not to discover the look of anxiety he’d anticipated. Clearly more persuasion was required.

‘We have information that suggests items of considerable value have been brought to this place over the last years. You will tell me where these are located.’

The knight’s strident tone carried undisguised threat, one hand moving towards the hilt of his sword, the inference undeniable.

‘As I said’ repeated the Prior softly ‘there is little to find, save that which we require to cater for our modest, everyday needs.’

As he spoke, he reached to a table, producing a small wooden box, swiftly seized by the knight, an eager glance inside discovering that it containing no more than a dozen coins.

‘You expect me to believe that this is all you have to offer me old man?’ snarled the knight between clenched teeth.

The sword emerged with one swift movement and, switching his attention to one of the other monks, the point swiftly came to rest over the man’s heart, a simultaneous gasp and a wide-eyed expression of fear combining, the prospect of imminent death a chilling reality.

‘Liar’ he shouted. ‘This miserable creature will pay the price should you refuse to cooperate.’ In alarm, the Prior raised a hand, imploring the knight to desist.

‘There is but a little more, which we keep for the poor and needy. It is housed safe below.’

He indicated the passage to his left, and set off hoping to defuse the situation. The knight nodded grimly, moving to follow as the Prior shuffled along a short corridor towards a stairway that led below.

‘You disappoint me’ he sneered, spinning round to the monk, a look of relief at having been spared still written across his face.

The look was still in evidence as the sword was savagely thrust towards his body. One simple, sharp intake of breath, not even a whimper of pain, was all that could be heard as, with a dull thud the blade penetrated clothes and flesh, the debile emerging from his back, a squelching, grinding sound of metal on bone accompanying the withdrawal of the weapon, gleaming bright red. The monk’s eyes widened, his face displaying not agony, but surprise. After a few seconds, blood oozed from his mouth and then, in a spreading pool, from his still twitching body as it fell heavily to the floor. The Prior and his companion gasped in horror at this sickening and brutal act.

‘Do not disappoint me again’ was the chilling advice as the knight spun round, his face within inches of the Prior’s startled eyes, foul breath warm on the man’s

cold, clammy skin. Choking back a sense of revulsion, the Prior scurried to the top of the stairs, closely followed by the knight, each taking the well-trodden wide stone steps into the cellar, the crypt looming to one side.

‘What is here?’ asked the knight curtly, indicating the graceful arches of the crypt.

‘There is nothing of value sire, save the sacrament, the body and blood of Christ. If you require solace for your soul, you may consider this worthy of your attention’ said the Prior boldly, sensing that the knight would not harm him whilst still requiring his assistance. Seizing the man’s habit at the neck, he threw him across the cellar.

‘The items of value you spoke of? Take me to them now’ he shouted, an echo of his voice drifting through the cellar and, almost certainly, to the ears of his companions on the floor above.

The Prior beckoned him towards an archway, a short passage leading to a wider tunnel, steps falling away to a solid wall with a dark entrance to its left. At regular intervals, mounted lanterns gave off a dull glow, identifying key areas on the journey. The cloying smell of beeswax, incongruous in this dank underworld, combined with dancing shadows as the flames were disturbed, created a feeling of unworldliness that even the hardened knight was unable to dismiss with impunity.

‘Below lies a chapel, a place purely for prayer and contemplation. Do you wish to see it?’ asked the Prior.

‘Later. What is up here’ demanded the knight, motioning towards a flight of stone steps ascending below a low barrel-vaulted ceiling, appearing to turn sharply and out of sight some twenty steps above.

‘Pray follow me’ said the Prior, climbing slowly, the knight in close attendance, the already oppressive atmosphere intensifying all the while.

‘What is this hideous place?’ asked the knight, peering anxiously through the flickering gloom. The Prior said nothing, continuing his sedate journey beyond the bend in the tunnel.

At the top of the stairs, they entered a wide chamber some ten feet in height, with an altar slab to the rear, on which burnt two candles, bright by comparison with the pitch-dark stillness all around. A recess on the far right was identified by the soft light from three small lamps, the flames casting ghostly shadows as the men entered the side chapel.

The Prior reached into a deep alcove beneath a stone cross that had been integrated into the wall, producing a wooden box that he handed to the knight with an inclination of his head.

Beneath light from a candle, the knight wrenched the lid back, greedily rummaging through the contents, the sound of coin-on-coin merging with a low laugh as he pictured the spoils augmenting the growing bounty he was accumulating, a tangible by-product of his designated duties.

So preoccupied was he with the gleeful task, he failed to notice the Prior slide furtively behind him, silently producing a long dagger, secreted earlier for an indeterminate reason, from within the folds of his habit. His conscience had not sat

comfortably with this unworthy decision, but he now found himself comforted by a sense of justification.

Raising the blade, he didn't hesitate, the act of murder he had just witnessed demanding retribution. And yet, he knew that the revulsion he felt was merely a tipping point, the underlying sense of resentment going far deeper.

For years, he had seen the power of his church, the protective shield that gave succour to the poor and needy, being eroded, the way of life he had enjoyed being ridiculed, undermined and marginalised. The man he was about to execute represented this feeling of towering indignation in human form.

The King's messenger, a sixth sense telling him all was not well, spun round sharply as the blade slashed down, causing the dagger to bite deep into his shoulder, penetrating the artery, causing exquisite pain, but not, as yet, disabling him entirely.

Turning, his face like thunder, he grasped the Prior savagely by the throat and threw him aside, the dagger clattering across the floor, disappearing into the shadows.

Drawing his sword, still red from the blood of the young monk, the knight loomed above the helpless Prior, death now, surely, inevitable. Bracing himself for the expected thrust, his contorted face relaxed as the blow failed to materialise, a sense of relief replaced by one of trepidation, making him wonder if sudden death might not have been the kinder option.

Despite his obvious discomfort, the knight wore a look of evil relish as he sheathed the sword, wincing audibly as the very action pulled on his wounded shoulder.

Dragging the Prior into the main chamber, the two oil-lamps spilling in the process, he left the man and stumbled down the steps to the landing, falling twice, the second time rising more slowly, a sensation of dizziness causing the passage ahead to appear blurred. Reaching the bottom of the cellar steps with difficulty, he called out loudly, the voice laboured, breath coming in gasps.

'Bring powder.'

His fellow knights, already poised at the top of the stairs, drawn by his earlier cries, hurried down with two small barrels. Placing them on the landing, they awaited further instructions.

'Leave' said the knight, with a sharp clarity that was at odds with how he was feeling.

Far from showing concern for the well-being of their senior officer, the two scuttled away, grateful to escape the cloying atmosphere of death and decay that radiated from the unholy place.

Returning to the hapless Prior, staggering ever more extravagantly, the syrupy air seemed to be draining his consciousness with each second that passed. The Prior knelt meekly at the altar, contemplating what lay in store for him, praying that the end might, ultimately, be swift. He had contemplated attacking his now weakened foe yet again, but he now recognised the temptation as a contradiction of the sacred vows he had undertaken, one of which being the preservation of life.

‘Is this the sole entrance to the chamber?’ growled the knight, the words barely discernible. The Prior nodded gravely.

‘Then it shall be your resting place for all eternity’ he replied, laughing loudly as he plummeted down the steps, rolling from side to side, some of the contents from the box spilling out before he had left the chamber, yet more dropping on the steps themselves.

Reaching the landing due more to gravity than purpose, having dropped the box when barely halfway down, he removed his sword to allow greater mobility, laying it on the landing, flames from the wall lamps reflecting from the blade, throwing swirling patterns of light into the silent darkness.

Breathing heavily, he carelessly laid a generous trail of powder up the stairs, away from the landing, leaving the barrel and staggering back down the steps. The remaining keg was dragged towards the cellar entrance, a good deal of its contents spilling out on to the floor, the intention being to ignite the charge from the cellar itself before retreating.

Returning to the landing, his strength rapidly falling away, sparks from the flint were poorly directed, resulting in two trails of fire spreading rapidly, one up the stairs towards the chamber, the other, simultaneously, pulsing back towards the cellar.

Glancing up, a hazy veil falling across his eyes, he could see the box on the steps above him, and started to crawl up the stairs as swiftly as he was able, parallel to the river of flame, intending to retrieve the goods and flee. But time nor mobility were on his side.

Even as both hands reached to seize the box, the upper charge exploded with a deafening roar, bringing the roof of the passage thundering down, burying man and box beneath several tons of rock, at the same time entombing the Prior in the chamber above. Seconds later, the lower charge detonated, closing off the entrance to the cellar.

The men upstairs, galvanised by the explosion, rushed down the steps towards the cellar, their progress halted by a toxic cloud of dust and smoke. Convinced there was little that could be done, they returned to the hall, selected items of considered value from the accumulated pile and rode swiftly away, considering their work to be complete.

A cart would be sent from Bodmin to collect the remainder in due course. Feeling no remorse for having abandoned their colleague, their sole focus rested on the question of how many of the valuable items removed from “The Retreat” would be declared, and how many they would keep for themselves.

The Prior knelt at the altar, a veil of dust from the explosion settling on the slab in front of him. After barely an hour of contemplation, the first of the two candle-flames flickered and died, his sad eyes plunged into total darkness as the second flame slowly expired but a minute later, leaving an orange pinprick of light that glowed for a minute more before melting away.

With a sense of world-weary resignation, he slumped forward in the soulless silence, waiting for God to welcome him into his kingdom, his biggest regret being that he had lived to see the disintegration of the monastic order under whose protection he had spent his entire life.

The remaining monk stood quietly in the main hall, astounded that his life had been spared when the knights had hastily departed. Staring around, wide-eyed and disbelieving, at the remains of the only existence he had known since the age of twelve, he felt very alone and yet strangely peaceful as he contemplated what may lay in store for him.

Shuffling through the open door, he started to walk slowly down the long drive away from “The Retreat”, frightened eyes blinking in the bright light of a hostile world, bristling with uncertainty, the safe-harbour of his sheltered life compromised forever. Suddenly, he was a free man, and yet, in that very sense of freedom, he could imagine no joy.

Behind him, the huge oak door remained open, a thin curtain of fine powder drifting into apologetic sunlight. Deep underground, thick, cloying dust gradually settled on the floor of the crypt, access from the cellar to the lower tunnels now denied by several tons of rocky debris. Beyond the roof-fall lay the blackness of the tunnel, a sword lying astride the passage on the landing, above which steps stretched upwards, the way barred by a second collapsed ceiling. From the base of the rubble, two feet protruded, a pool of blood hungrily absorbing the fine powder that still floated down.

Below the landing, steps descended to the small chapel, located to the left of a, seemingly, solid rock-face. And yet, beyond this ‘impenetrable’ barrier, the tunnel extended and widened, free from dust, undisturbed, waiting.

Sleeping within the silent catacombs, several large, sealed lead caskets slumbered in the darkness, their contents destined never to be gazed upon, save that someone with faith and resolve were to step forward and free them from their resting place. But did such a person exist?

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The Kevrinek series

Book 1	The Homecoming	
Book 2	Chamber of the Dead	
Book 3	Kingdom of the South.	March 2021
Book 4	The Penkevil Connection	April 2021
Book 5	The Renaissance Factor	Autumn 2021

