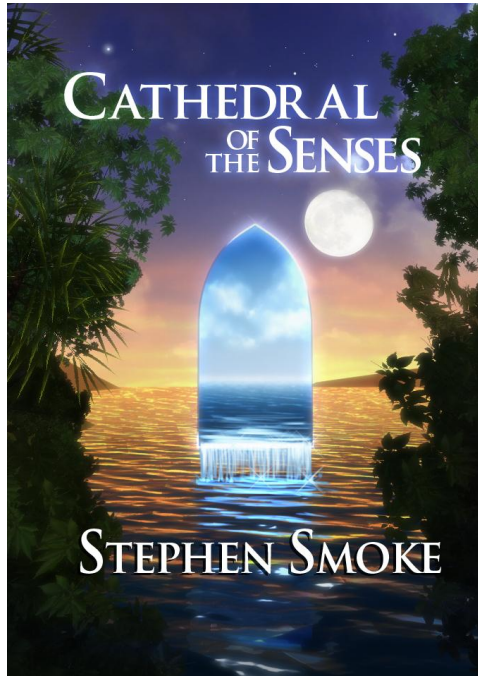


# *Cathedral of the Senses*



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## Chapter 1

I used to box. Pushups from a bench with a twenty pound weight on my back. Fifteen minutes of rope—the fancy, jump-through-a-lariat, keep-time-with-the-music way. I could keep a rhythm with a speed bag you could set a Rolex to, and I could leave impressions in a heavy bag. I'd spar once a week and could give and take a punch.

Eventually though, I hit a wall. Actually, it was more like a wall hit me. I got tired of taking more punches from those who took weekend sparring more seriously than I did. And hanging around the gym I saw what happened to guys, and some women, who took too many punches, or just one big one when their heads were at the wrong place at the wrong time. I needed to keep whatever brain cells I had left as intact as possible for as long as possible. Living in LA required focus.

I had mined from boxing all I ever really wanted from it anyhow: I *knew* that I knew how to fight if I needed to.

And if that didn't work, I always had my gun.

I was a private detective. I lived and worked in San Pedro, which was about as south of LA as you could go and still be considered to be in Los Angeles. The oldest freeway in America began in Pasadena and ran south to San Pedro, where it dead-ended into refineries and the Port of Los Angeles, winding through the city like some kind of snake, ready to strike at any moment. The short off-ramps near Pasadena reminded drivers that there was a time when not everyone drove eighty miles an hour. And the aging buildings and deserted streets of San Pedro reminded locals that not every city comes back to life just because you support the arts and call a few city blocks Old Town.

My home and office were in an abandoned church I fixed up with a little money I made in the stock market, back in the days when free market capitalism was all the rage. Things moved fast these days and what was gone was gone fast and wasn't coming back.

I set up my workout room in what used to be a Sunday school room for kids. I had a BowFlex, a treadmill, a couple of LuLu Lemon yoga mats, and mirrors on three walls. I wasn't a narcissist—at least not anymore. At least not as much.

I had a routine. Awake at 5:30, lie in bed for five minutes, eyes closed to do my “set up process”—essentially getting myself ready for the day, seeing it unfold, seeing things already done. Then to the bathroom and the morning Sudoku, after which I read something that makes me feel good. Then I either run outside for 3 miles or do a half hour on the treadmill. Then upper body exercises on the BowFlex, ten minutes of yoga and finish with ten minutes of meditation. I'm showered, dressed and at my desk, in what used to be the church library, by 8am.

Some people referred to me as the “spiritual detective,” which is not a term I'd use. I did the usual PI stuff—although I did my best to stay away from divorce cases. I got my moniker—the “spiritual” part—when I was working in San Francisco in the late 80s. A beautiful woman named Valerie Tyrell came into my office and into my life, in a strange way: She hired me to find God. She said that if God was everywhere, then the job ought to be a piece of cake. It's a long story and it has been much talked about over the years, particularly among people who believe in such quests and puzzles. She was satisfied with the results and, I have to admit, it changed my life as well.

Since then, several times a year people came into my office with peculiar requests.

So it didn't take me completely by surprise when Owen Clark walked into my office and, after only a brief introduction, said, “I'd like you to find my ‘self.’”

“Are you lost?” I replied glibly, waiting for a punch line.

“Exactly. And I think you’re the perfect person to help find me.”

I was a trained professional, with a reputation for talking whack-jobs off the ledge, both figuratively and literally. People who liked me called me eccentric. Those who didn’t called me other things. Colorful things and not within earshot.

But every now and then someone caught me off guard. For a moment I was waiting for some guy to pop out with a hidden camera and tell me I was going to be on one of those reality shows. Or that I was being videoed for some kind of release on YouTube.

When no one appeared, I said, “Mr. ...?” He had already told me his name, but it had suddenly slipped my mind.

“Clark. Owen Clark.”

“Mr. Clark, there’s a guy just down the block from here, a friend of mine. I highly recommend him. He might be able to help you much more than I can. He’s got a little couch and reasonable hourly rates. Very confidential. He actually looks a little like Bob Newhart—the psychologist; not the innkeeper.”

Clark smiled. “I’m used to people thinking my predicament a little odd...”

Really? I was thinking something a little more unkind than that, but I just nodded and wrote my friend’s name and number on the back of one of my cards.

“I came to you for a reason.”

I thought about saying, ‘Because I’m supposed to be the patron saint of lunatics?’ but I settled on, “What reason was that?”

“You helped a friend of mine a while ago. Valerie Tyrell.”

The name took me back. She was the woman who had hired me to find God. Her request was as strange as Clark’s and yet I had helped her. But then she was a lot better looking than Owen Clark.

“She said you would take me seriously.”

I was thinking that maybe she had over-promised. “How is she?”

“She’s fine. She sends her best.”

Valerie Tyrell’s best was worth receiving.

“I can pay you, of course. I can pay you quite well, in fact. Money is really no object.”

For me money *was* an object: An object I needed more of and soon. “Why don’t you just lay it out for me and let’s see where we go from there.”

“All right. Thank you.” Clark removed his sport coat and got comfortable. “I’m in the movie business. In fact, I run a major studio: Collingwood Pictures. A couple of years ago I came across a script I fell in love with. One of the elements in the story had to do with holograms and possible realities. I hired the best special effects and computer guys from Hollywood and around the world. In an airplane hangar down in Long Beach we built an elaborate set consisting of several thousand holograms, each one a slightly different world, or reality, from the next. The project has cost me roughly one hundred million dollars so far.

“The centerpiece of the movie we’re making is a holographic parallel reality device.”

“Ah, back up, Owen. What exactly is a hologram?”

“Well, it’s a photographic record produced by illuminating the object with coherent light, like from a laser, and, without using lenses, exposing a film to light reflected from the object and to a direct beam of coherent light. When interference patterns—”

“Owen. I’m not a physicist.”

“All right. You know those three-dimensional images on your credit cards, or on medallions or charms, or greeting cards... The information to create a hologram looks like nothing to the naked eye. Then when you project light through it, the image appears like magic. And another unique thing about a hologram is that every piece of information contains all the information needed to replicate the whole.”

“Like DNA.”

“Kind of. Some people think this world is like a hologram, but that’s not important for our discussion. Anyhow, I go down to the airplane hangar because I want to play around with the holographic parallel reality machine.”

“Owen?”

“Right. It looks like a big egg-shaped phone booth. When I put on a special helmet, and turn on the device, I’m theoretically able to see probable realities projected by my mind based on my beliefs and thoughts about this moment.”

“You know that sounds crazy.”

“I know. But I know you’ll hear me out because I know what happened with you and Valerie in Homile. She told me everything.”

In a little one-building town called Homile, Valerie and I had stepped into a holographic universe and something incredible happened. To this day, I’m not quite sure what exactly happened or what it meant, but I took his point: I’d had personal experience with holograms. “All right, but don’t go too Star Trek on me, okay? The world I live in expects me to pay with real money.”

Clark nodded and continued. “While I was in the device, everything seemed great and it was incredible. Unbelievable!”

“I get it. And then what happened?”

“I got out of the machine and...” For the first time, Clark didn’t know what to say.

“What?”

“The machine disappeared.”

“What?”

“The holograms disappeared. The device was gone. The airplane hangar was still there, but it was filled with boxes. I made my way out of the warehouse and a security guard confronted me.”

“A studio guard?”

“Not exactly. He was a rent-a-cop-security guard and he didn’t know me from Adam. I told him who I was, but it didn’t make any difference. The warehouse wasn’t owned by my studio but by some Chinese importer. Eventually I convinced the guard I wasn’t stealing anything and he let me go.

“I immediately called my private office number and got some pizza parlor in West Hollywood. Suddenly I’m living in a Rod Serling nightmare. I checked my wallet and, sure enough, I was Owen Clark. But the address on my driver’s license was not the same as where I lived—and which was on my driver’s license the last time I checked.

“So I took a cab—my car was not there—back to the studio and tried to get in the gate. The guard there didn’t know me. I told him to ask for my assistant, but no one had ever heard of her. I got the guy to show me a roster of major players and the only person I knew was a guy who I’d assigned a trailer to on the lot a few months ago. I had the guard call him. He put me on the phone and the guy had never heard of me.”

“What do you make of it?” I said.

“As you can imagine, I was totally freaked out. I’d had a few glasses of wine before I got into the machine, but I wasn’t on any medication—legal or illegal. I thought maybe I was dreaming, but a couple days of living this nightmare convinced me that it’s real. Since then I’ve been to see three psychics, a psychiatrist, a priest, a shaman...”

“And a partridge in a pear tree.”

“You’re my last hope.”

“And you found me how?”

“Like I said, Valerie Tyrell. Years ago I read the Hamilton Caine book about your shared experience. I tracked her down and talked to her about what happened. She said you could help me if I could find you. But you’re a tough guy to find.”

For someone in business, you would think being hard to find would be a negative. But people find me. Most of my clients are referrals. “So how can I help you?”

“After talking to Valerie I realized that I had lost my ‘self.’ I lost the self I wanted to be. The self I *believed* myself to be.” He paused and looked at me. “I need to be that person again.”

I had a sense about these things. I knew I would take this case. I didn’t know why, but I knew I would take it.

“Okay. I get five hundred a day, plus expenses. I’m going to need your Social Security Number and any other relevant information you can give me about the ‘self’ you want to find.” It even sounded crazy to me when I said it.

Owen took out a pen and wrote down his Social Security Number on a pad on my desk, along with a few other pieces of information he thought might be helpful.

“I’ll look into this today. Call me in the morning.”

“So you’re taking my case?”

“I’m not saying no. Call me in the morning.”

He thanked me. A lot. I think he was just relieved to have someone listen to his story and not call the rubber room squad.

I walked him out and shut one of the giant cathedral double-doors behind him. I was alone. Which was how I liked it. At least I was getting used to it.

Clark’s odd tale resonated somewhere inside me that I couldn’t quite get hold of. Like a dream that disappears when you try to remember it. I rarely had that feeling, but I’d had it when Valerie Tyrell hired me to find God. It seemed stupid at the time and I could say I just did it because I needed the money or because she was so good looking. But it was more than that.

Besides, I’m a detective. I find people.