THE SACRED CIPHER

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The Sacred Cipher: A Novel

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To my wife, Andrea,
and to my children,
Michael, Patrick, Meghan, & Matthew
Only love is eternal

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PROLOGUE

1889 · ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT

Only three types of buyers entered the Attarine—the foolish, the fraudulent, and the forewarned. The foolish, who acted on whim instead of wisdom and expected to fleece an ignorant Egyptian native; the fraudulent, expert in identifying well-crafted forgeries, anxious to pass them on for great profit; and the forewarned, who searched for treasure but were wise enough to employ someone who knew the ways, and the merchants, of the seductive but evil-ridden Attarine.

Spurgeon knew the risk. But treasures awaited in the twisting, narrow stone streets snaking away from the Attarine Mosque.

He had Mohammad, he had a gun, he had money—and he had God.

Peering down the darkened alley, Spurgeon worried that, perhaps, he didn't have enough.

Mohammad entered the alley and disappeared from view. The alley was gray-on-gray, denied sunlight by overhanging, second-floor balconies adorning almost every building, their shuttered windows barely an arm's length from each other. Joining with the dark was a riot of refuse; crazed, cadaver-like dogs; and powerfully pungent, unknown odors.

The Attarine District was home to the greatest concentration of antiquities dealers in Alexandria, both the illicit and the honorable. A person could buy almost any historical artifact along the ancient streets of the Attarine. Some were even genuine. And Charles Haddon Spurgeon was on a treasure hunt.

He held his breath; he held his heart; and he stepped into the dark.

At the first fork, Mohammed Isfahan was waiting. Spurgeon's heart slowed its pounding pace. Mohammed confidently led the way, weaving in and out of the shoppers and the strollers who clogged the tight byways. It was early morning, before the sun began to scorch the stones, and Spurgeon was grateful for the moderate breeze off the Mediterranean. At his size, the heat sapped his

strength and soaked his shirt within minutes. Though the morning was warm, Spurgeon hoped to get back into his hotel, under a fan in a shaded corner of the dining room, long before the withering heat began blowing from the Sahara. On one of his regular trips to the Middle East, Spurgeon was trolling for ancient biblical texts and Mohammed, recommended by the hotel's concierge, promised he knew where to look.

Now fifty-six, he was England's best-known preacher, and he grudgingly accepted the considerable influence and power he had earned as pastor of London's famed New Park Street Church for the last thirty years. Spurgeon was the first to admit preaching was his passion.

But Spurgeon was also the first to admit that books were his weakness. He typically devoured six books per week and had written many of his own. Now, scuttling through the twilight of the dusty alley, Spurgeon sought to slake that hunger in the shops of the Attarine.

Rounding a curve in the street, Mohammed paused alongside a curtain-covered doorway, pulled aside the curtain, and motioned for Spurgeon to enter. Inside the shop, not only was the atmosphere cooler, but it also carried the rich scent of old leather, soft and smooth like musty butter. Mohammed bowed reverentially as the proprietor emerged from the rear of the shop. He was a small man of an indeterminate age. What defined him were hawklike, ebony eyes overflowing with wisdom, discerning of character, and surrounded by a brilliant white kaffiyeh. Mohammed spoke rapidly in Arabic, bowed again, and then stepped back as the proprietor approached Spurgeon.

"*Salaam aleikum*," he said, bowing his head toward Spurgeon, who was startled when the man continued in perfectly cadenced English, "and peace be with you, my friend. It is an honor for my humble shop to welcome such a famous man under its roof. May I be permitted to share with you some tea and some of our little treasures?"

Wondering about the origin of the shopkeeper's English, Spurgeon responded with a bow of his own. "*Salaam aleikum*, my brother. You honor me by using my language in your shop. But I must ask, how have you any knowledge of me?"

"Ah, the name of Spurgeon has found its way down many streets. I am Ibrahim El-Safti, and I am at your service. My friend Mohammed tells me you are interested in texts that refer to the stories of your Nazarene prophet, is that correct?"

"I would be honored to review any such texts as may be in your possession," said Spurgeon. He took the chair and the tea that were offered by El-Safti and waited quietly as the shopkeeper sought and retrieved three books. While Spurgeon studied the books, one in Aramaic, one in Greek, and the last in an unknown language, Mohammed and the shopkeeper retired through the doorway, stepping outside the curtain.

Spurgeon slipped into a scholar's zone, focusing intently on the words before him. But the breeze turned, pushing aside the curtain in the door and carrying the words of Mohammed and El-Safti into the shop and up to Spurgeon's ear—one well trained in Arabic, among many other languages.

"What of the scroll?" Spurgeon heard Mohammed ask.

"Do not speak of that scroll in front of this infidel," El-Safti countered, his voice stronger and more virile than it had been earlier. "You know what our tradition holds; this scroll would be of great benefit to the infidels, both the Jews and the Christians. We are to hold it in trust and keep it out of their hands at all costs."

"You speak like an imam," Mohammed said. "No one knows what is on that scroll; no one has been able to translate its meaning. How do we know what it contains?"

Spurgeon forgot the books in his lap. He heard a more interesting story floating on the breeze.

"If it can't be read, is there any difference in whose hands it rests? I believe the English preacher would pay handsomely for the privilege of owning something he doesn't understand. Ibrahim," said Mohammed, "look at me. It could pay for your daughter's wedding."

"Do not tempt me, Mohammed," El-Safti said. "That scroll has remained here for two generations, and no one has ever requested to see it. Quiet, now, and let us see what may interest the Englishman."

Spurgeon attempted to return his attention to the books, but his eyes were pulled back to the men as they entered through the curtain. El-Safti reverted to his perfectly subservient composure as he stepped before Spurgeon. The only thing out of place was an amulet—a Coptic cross with a lightning bolt flashing through on the diagonal—that slipped from the neck of his robe as he came through the doorway.

"Do these books meet with your interest?" El-Safti asked.

Spurgeon rose from the chair and handed the books back to El-Safti. "I am disappointed to tell you, my friend, that you may have been swindled. The book

in Aramaic is a fraud, and a poor one at that. The Greek, I have two copies in my library. And the third is in a language I have not seen before, but does not appear to be Semitic. Tell me, do you not possess anything more authentic?"

A moment's silence passed through the shop. El-Safti's pitch-black eyes flickered with offense.

"My humble apologies," El-Safti said. "Your reputation as a scholar is well earned, Dr. Spurgeon. But perhaps I do have something that you would find interesting. It is very old, but of indeterminate age." El-Safti walked to the back of the shop. "It is an infidel's mezuzah, nicely etched, wrapped in a very colorful piece of Moroccan silk."

Disappointed in the books, Spurgeon's interest increased at the mention of silk. His niece's birthday would be upon him when he returned to England. Perhaps there was a prize here, after all.

El-Safti slipped into a small closet at the rear corner of the shop and could be heard snapping the hasp on a lock and moving a chain. Silence, then a stream of Arabic epithets, as El-Safti recoiled from the closet.

"Forgive me," he said, his wild eyes looking first at Spurgeon and then at Mohammed. "It is gone. The scroll, it is gone."

First fear, then unbelief, fought for dominance in El-Safti's weathered face. His hands trembled as he wrung them together.

"Allah has punished me for my greed," El-Safti said, slipping back into Arabic. "Mohammad, remove this infidel. And hurry back. We must think. We must find the scroll. We must find it before it is lost forever."

Three days later, Spurgeon wandered through the Alexandrian bazaar, his work for the trip complete and his passage for London booked on a ship leaving the next morning. But his mind kept drifting back to El-Safti and the nearly hysterical look on his face when he discovered this mysterious scroll had disappeared.

What could have caused the man such fear? he wondered, his hand exploring vibrant textiles and metal trinkets as he strolled through the bazaar. It appeared he was willing to sell. Even if it had been stolen or lost, why react so severely when he was about to sell it anyway?

He was about to turn a corner and walk away from the bazaar, when a soft voice coming from a shaded corner of a building caught his attention.

"Effendi, Dr. Spurgeon, please, may I have a moment of your time?"

As Spurgeon turned to the sound of his name, an elderly man in well-worn, but once-fine, clothes stepped out of the shadows, bowing deeply from the waist.

"Please forgive this unwarranted intrusion, but I knew of no other way."

"How do you know who I am?" Spurgeon asked, taking no step toward the man, who looked more like a beggar than a prince.

"You have walked these streets many times, Dr. Spurgeon, searching for treasures in books and letters. What has been more memorable for my people, why you are well known and highly regarded, are the many kindnesses you have done for our children, so many who have been healed by the doctors you sent. It is why many in this city watch out for your safety."

Spurgeon's curiosity spiked. "So, what can I do for you?"

"More than likely, it's what I can do for you," said the old man. "A few days ago, you were in the Attarine. There was some discussion about a scroll. Allah be praised, I believe I may be able to help you."

The old man, whose face was deeply wrinkled and the color of old leather, pulled from within his kaftan a brightly designed piece of silk. Spurgeon took a step toward the elderly Arab, then another, joining him in the half-light of the building's shadows in spite of a gnawing unease.

"I had the good fortune of being in the Attarine at the same time you were in the shop of one El-Safti," said the old man. "I think you were quite fortunate that the document El-Safti sought was no longer in his possession. I think, had you purchased this document, you never would have left the Attarine with it in your possession."

"So you stole it?"

"Effendi," the old man demurred. "I am only the recipient of Allah's provision and a defender of your highly esteemed person. If, however, you have no interest in this trinket, perhaps I should take it elsewhere?" As the man began to return the silk-draped object back into the depths of his kaftan, Spurgeon quickly stepped even closer and laid his hand on the man's arm.

"Please, my friend," Spurgeon said, looking into the old man's peaceful eyes. "It would not be appropriate to send you away without at least examining the gift you bring me."

"Many thanks," said the old man. He bowed his head but never took his eyes from the Englishman. "Here, please join me by this table so that I may display to you this treasure."

Overcoming his reluctance, Spurgeon stepped to the small table that stood in the shadows of the building. The old man opened the silk cover, a purse of some sort, withdrew an engraved metal tube, and laid it on the table. Moving closer to the table, Spurgeon began running his fingers over the silk purse, fascinated by its color and the strangeness of its designs, symbols of long, swooping lines dancing across a bloodred sea.

"Ah, yes, it is a beautiful purse, is it not?" the old man said. "But I believe you may be even more intrigued by what is inside." With that, the old man took hold of the handle on the side of the cylinder and, turning the metal shaft that extended through its center, began extracting a rather plain, parchment scroll. What was on the scroll, however, was far from plain.

Spurgeon leaned over the table, adjusting his spectacles for a better look. The parchment itself, probably sheepskin, was remarkably well preserved, indicating a majority of its life had been spent in a dry climate, not here in Alexandria where humidity would have destroyed it. On the surface of the parchment were written twenty-one columns of symbols arranged in seven groupings—three vertical rows of symbols in each of the groupings. It was an odd construction. Spurgeon, however, was more intrigued by the symbols themselves, a series of simple, yet stylistic, characters. "What is it?" he asked.

The old man shrugged.

"I don't know what language that is," said Spurgeon "I don't know if I've ever seen anything like it. Tell me, what do you think it means?"

"Forgive me, Effendi, but I do not have a great deal of time," the old man said, turning to face Spurgeon. "I have a desire to dispose of this treasure. Perhaps you would be willing to take it off my hands for, say, three thousand piastres?"

Spurgeon ran his fingers over the cylinder and entered into the obligatory negotiations.

By the time each had argued, cajoled, and conceded, Spurgeon purchased the purse and the metal tube for fewer than fifteen hundred piastres, only a few English pounds. Spurgeon was quite satisfied with himself. He had just purchased a fine gift, the beautiful silk purse, for his niece's birthday. Wrapping the tube tightly back into the silk purse, Spurgeon covered it with a discarded section of burlap and tucked it under his arm. Turning to leave, he was startled by two things: first, that the old man had already disappeared into the bazaar and, second, the lurking presence of Mohammed Isfahan, pressed into a darkened doorway across the street.

Spurgeon's walk back to his hotel was much more brisk than usual, in spite of the heat.

1891 · LONDON, ENGLAND

With a speed that belied his bulk, his umbrella lying on the ground, Spurgeon regained his feet and began running downhill, looking for lights and praying for help. He turned twice, skidding on the stones but not breaking his pace, until he came to much-needed rest in the darkened alcove of the apothecary shop on Weston Street.

Spurgeon loathed his dread. He mocked himself: where was his faith? Yet hidden from the light, he drank in the night air in the deep draughts of a desperate man and tried to free his mind to make a clear decision. Every shadow became a warrant for his destruction. He held the package loosely, tucked into the large pocket of his woolen overcoat, afraid that if he grasped it too tightly, his anxiety might transmit some signal to those who were in pursuit. Yet he dared not let it go.

The tide waited for no man and for no ship. If Spurgeon intended to reach the Thames on time—and the cutter sent from the trans-Atlantic steamer *Kronos*—he had to find a way out of this doorway. He was more convinced than ever that he had to get this package, his precious scroll, on that ship.

Lord, you are in control, he silently prayed. *So why am I so frightened for my life?*

Spurgeon pressed himself deeply into the doorway, seeking the darkness. He held his breath to quiet his gasping, but still his heart hammered in his chest. His eyes, wide with alarm, darted from corner to shadow to alley to street. He strained to extend his ears further into the night. All this he did while holding himself rigidly still.

A movement, a sound, and his life could end in an instant.

At any other time, the streets of London would have held a great hope, a feeling of fulfillment, of calling, of destiny. These were his streets and his people, and he had moved through them and walked over them for so long they had almost become a part of him, except for tonight. The streets were the same. The city was the same. The fear was new.

Rain slanting hard behind the wind drove the sane and the sensible indoors. From the shelter of the darkened shop's doorway, Spurgeon willed himself to silence. The street was empty except where the rainwater sluiced along the gutter in the middle of the cobblestones. But Spurgeon no longer trusted emptiness. He scanned every dark space for some sign of movement.

Curse the pies and the pastries and Mrs. Dowell's cooking. Once a symbol of growing affluence and influence, Spurgeon's girth now slowed his legs when he needed speed and sapped his endurance as he ran for his life.

Twenty minutes earlier, Spurgeon had stepped out of his parsonage in Newington, Southwark, and into the driving rain. It was a walk he had taken scores of times before, in good weather and foul. It was a simple task, after all. Walk down to the Thames, where the cutter would dock. Meet his old friend Captain Paradis. Exchange a package and some good wishes. And be off again for the warmth of the fire waiting in his study. A simple task.

Spurgeon walked quickly down Great Dover Street, toward Weston Street and the Thames, trying not to look over his shoulder. His umbrella helped deflect much of the downpour but also restricted his vision. As he turned into Black Horse Court, by habit, his gaze swiveled to the rear. For weeks, his anxiety had been fed by a foreboding that he was being watched, followed. With the rain pounding on his umbrella, he failed to hear the fast-approaching hoofbeats on the cobblestones. The horse missed him, but the front wheel of the livery wagon caught his shoulder as it flashed past, driving him back to the wall and down to the sidewalk. Spurgeon may have thought it an accident except for the arrow that thudded into the wall next to his head, and the second that clipped his coat as he twisted to look at the first.

He had fled for his life, leaving both his umbrella and his dignity on Black Horse Court. Now, here he was, not far from his church and his world—cold, wet, hiding in the dark, terrified of some unknown, but very real, threat.

Spurgeon often wondered if the scroll he held in his pocket would lead others to pursue its path, bringing them to him. Now he had his answer.

Soaked to the skin, remaining in the dark, Spurgeon twisted his head to the left and tried to look up the street. A shadow moved on the right in a garden, and another on the left in the lee of a stable. But what Spurgeon focused on was the shape coming around the corner and toward his hiding place. *Please God*, Spurgeon mouthed in silent prayer. The shape slowed and stopped halfway down the street. Spurgeon waited. The door opened and closed, and the shape

slowly moved forward. Spurgeon waited. Only as the hansom came abreast of his hiding place did Spurgeon toss himself out of hiding, arm raised. "Cabbie!" Startled, the hansom driver reined up. Spurgeon was already scrambling through the door and into the cab. "Shad Thames, the docks at Curfew Street—quickly, please—we must get there before the tide."

A snap of the whip just as Spurgeon spun his head. The cab rocked forward, so he would never be certain. But snatching a look out the rear window as the cab began to move, Spurgeon caught a momentary glimpse of what appeared to be two men clothed in kaftans and kaffiyeh, running in the shadows of the buildings on either side of the street. Two arrows thumped into the back wall of the cab, their pointed barbs his only companions as the cabbie raced to the river.

1891 · NEW YORK CITY

"Your wife's strudel is always the highlight of each crossing."

"Thank you, Captain Paradis. As soon as she heard you at the door, she went to the kitchen to prepare one in your honor. But we will both have to wait until after dinner, I'm afraid. Here, sit," said Louis Klopsch. "What have you brought from Charles this time?"

Captain Timothy Paradis reached into the canvas boat bag that was propped against his chair, the one with *Kronos* stitched on its side. "I'm not sure, Dr. Klopsch, but this one is certainly not a book." Paradis lifted a bundle from the bag and cautiously unwrapped it.

Making sure debris fell into the boat bag and not onto Mrs. Klopsch's clean floor, Paradis shook off remnants of sawdust and held aloft an ornately designed, red silk purse. From the purse, he withdrew a metal tube about the size of a collapsed telescope, with designs etched on its surface.

"Reverend Spurgeon said I was to deliver it to you, and you alone," said Paradis, passing the tube into Klopsch's hands. "And I was to do it personally. Reverend Spurgeon was quite emphatic on that point, I must say."

Dr. Louis Klopsch's friendship with the famous London preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon extended well beyond the two years since Klopsch had purchased a unique newspaper owned by Spurgeon, *The Christian Herald and Signs*

of Our Times. Klopsch continued publishing the newspaper, and it had grown into a place of prominence among New York City's faithful.

Klopsch hefted the metal tube in his hands. "I mentioned to him once that I had an interest in ancient documents," he said to Paradis. "Now, I have no more room to store the gifts he, and his colleagues, have sent me from around the world. I have a closet there, in the hallway, which is full of books from Dr. Spurgeon. Believe me, I'm grateful. But . . ." Klopsch shrugged his shoulders. "And this . . . what could this be? It is very . . ."

Gerta Klopsch stood silently in the doorway, a towel in her hands, a smile on her full face, and the smell of cabbage swirling in her wake. "It is lovely," said Gerta. "But I think it must wait. Louis . . . Captain . . . dinner is ready."

After two weeks eating in the galley of the *Kronos*, Paradis was up and out of his chair in a lick.

"Well, we'll just put this away for now," said Klopsch. He returned the tube to the silk purse, which he fastened shut. Entering the hallway to the dining room, Klopsch stopped, turned a key in the lock, and opened the door to a closet.

"Upon my word," said Paradis, "I never dreamed you had so many . . . you are right, sir. There is no more room."

Klopsch pulled the silk purse tight around the metal tube and wedged it into a small space in the corner of a bottom shelf. "When next you see Charles, please tell him what you witnessed here tonight." Klopsch closed the door, turned the key, and escorted Paradis down the hall. "Please, tell him no more . . . no more books."

The *Kronos* was moving on the tide, sliding smoothly out of New York harbor, when Captain Timothy Paradis caught the smell of apples on the air and was reminded of Gerta Klopsch's apple strudel, the last piece of which sat on a bench to his left, wrapped in brown paper. It was then he remembered the letter.

The letter from Spurgeon to Klopsch that was inside the purse. The letter he had forgotten to tell the doctor about.

1896 • NEW YORK CITY

"Louis? Do men from the mission know our address?"

Dr. Louis Klopsch lowered his newspaper and considered his wife's question. "No, Gerta. Why do you ask?"

Gerta Klopsch took a step into the sitting room, her twisting hands tangled in the embroidered apron that tried valiantly to cover her ample proportions. "Today, two men came. Strange men . . . foreign . . . they look like sailors. They come to the gate in back. I surprised them when I went out with wash clothes. They asked for you by name. Who should know we live here?"

Klopsch laid the paper in his lap, the last gasps of a brittle winter sun barely piercing the windows of their home, a small, two-story Federal-style house in Lower Manhattan. He didn't like the sounds of this. He and Gerta made their home far enough away from the Bowery Mission—on Ryder's Alley, a thin, L-shaped lane between Fulton and Gold streets—that none should stumble into their yard by mistake. In the two years since he had purchased the facility, a rescue mission for the homeless and derelict along New York's infamous Bowery, this was the first time that anything like this had occurred.

"These men, what was their purpose?" he asked. "Did you inquire why they sought me?"

"No, Louis . . . forgive me. They ask for you. I say you are not here. And they leave. Quickly. I can ask them nothing more."

Klopsch rose, placed the newspaper neatly on his chair, and crossed the room to his wife. He rescued her hands from the wrinkled apron and held them softly in his own. "All is well, Gerta." He placed a finger under her chin, tilting her face toward his. "There is nothing to fear. I will discover more about these men, of that I am certain."

Klopsch was confused, unsure about the sound that woke him that night, until he heard it a second time. Breaking glass.

He slipped out of bed—fortunately Gerta was a sound sleeper—and pulled his pants under his nightshirt. Suspenders hanging at his sides, Klopsch moved silently to the top of the stairs and listened to the night. He felt a chill draft

rising from the floor below, brother to the one rising up his spine. A crackling sound . . . two thumps . . . and Klopsch edged swiftly down the stairs, his body leaning back against the wall.

Klopsch heard a muffled crack to his left as he cleared the final step. Standing in the foyer, he hesitated for just a moment—should he grab his heavy-handled walking stick or try to light the gas lamp? In that brief moment, a dark shape backed out from the closet to his left and into the hall. The shape appeared to be carrying bundles in his arms.

"Stop!" Klopsch grabbed the stick in his right hand and raised it over his head. Feet ran into the darkness, the back door burst open, and two shadows fled into the yard before Klopsch could move an inch.

Gerta, her hand to her mouth, stared at the pile of discarded books in the hallway, the glass scattered on the floor of the sitting room, as Klopsch came back from securing the back door.

"Louis, what is this?" she whispered. "Your desk." She waved a hand at the mangled papers and broken bindings pulled from overflowing bookshelves. She turned to glance at the broken door to the closet. "Your books. Why should someone do this?"

"Bandits . . . robbers, I suppose. Perhaps they were searching for money."

Klopsch walked over to the closet door. The wood was shattered, the broken lock lying on the floor. He picked up one of the old, leather books from where it had been thrown into the hallway.

"They were searching, yes . . . but not money," said Gerta. "Perhaps those men from today come back."

It was an old book. Written in Latin. He stroked the leather binding, straightened the gilded edges where they were gouged. "Why would anyone want to steal these books?"

Klopsch picked the books up from the floor and, one by one, returned them to the shelves in the closet. He was no fool. Neither was Gerta. Danger lived here.

"Perhaps in your new office, you should a safe put." Gerta's brow furrowed at the closet with the shattered door, the one that held so many of Spurgeon's treasures. "A big safe."