

THE  
ALEPPO  
CODE

A NOVEL

TERRY  
BRENNAN

Kregel Publications

## Prominent Characters

### The team that discovered the Third Temple of God hidden under the Temple Mount:

**Tom Bohannon.** Executive director of the Bowery Mission in New York City; former investigative reporter.

**Joe Rodriguez.** Curator of the Periodicals Room in the New York Public Library's main building on Bryant Park; married to Deirdre, Tom Bohannon's sister.

**"Sammy" Rizzo.** Director of the book storage and retrieval system in the Humanities and Social Sciences Library on Bryant Park at 42nd Street in New York City; colleague of Joe Rodriguez; a small person, a tad over four feet.

**Dr. Richard Johnson Sr.** Managing director of the Collector's Club in Manhattan; former chair of the Antiquities College at Columbia University; fellow of the British Museum.

**Annie Bohannon.** Tom's wife of thirty years; photographer.

**Baqir al-Musawi.** President of Syria.

**Benjamin Fineman.** Messianic rabbi and custodian of Jeremiah's Grotto.

**Bill Cartwright.** Director of the Central Intelligence Agency; President Whitestone's longtime friend and accountability partner.

**Chaim Shomsky.** Chief of staff to the prime minister.

**Deirdre Rodriguez.** Sister of Tom Bohannon, wife of Joe Rodriguez.

**Dr. Brandon McDonough.** Provost of Trinity College, Dublin; expert in biblical archeology; and Richard Johnson's boss at the British Museum.

**Eliazar Baruk.** Prime minister of Israel; lives in Tel Aviv.

**General Moishe Orhlon.** Israeli defense minister.

**Jonathan Whitestone.** President of the United States; Republican; evangelical Christian from the state of Texas.

**Kallie Nolan.** Masters candidate in biblical archeology; friend of Sammy Rizzo; assisted the team in finding the Temple.

**King Abbudin.** Ruler of Saudi Arabia, fifth of the Saudi kings, secret leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

**Leonidas.** Informer, selling secret intelligence to radical Islamists.

**Levi Sharp.** Director of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security force.

**David Posner.** Deputy director of Mossad, Israel's international intelligence and special operations agency.

**Latiffa Naouri.** Chief historian of the Iraqi Antiquities Commission, former colleague of Annie Bohannon.

**Lukas Painter.** Director of Mossad, Israel's relentless and feared international intelligence agency.

**Mike Whalen.** Ex-Navy Seal, leader of the National Geographic photo/video team in Iraq.

**Mehdi Essaghir.** President of Iran.

**Roberta Smith.** Leader of the Demotic Dictionary Project at Chicago University's Oriental Institute, expert on the Demotic language.

**Rory O'Neill.** Commissioner of the New York City Police Department.

**Sam Reynolds.** Career diplomat of the U.S. State Department; assisted the team that found the Temple.

**Sergeant Jeremiah Fischhoff.** Battle-tested veteran of the Israel Defense Force, wounded in the rescue of Annie Bohannon.

**Sheik Khalid al-Kabir.** Head of the Anbar Awakening, the nomadic tribes in Western Iraq who joined forces with U.S. Marines to fight Al Qaeda, old friend of Annie Bohannon.

## Prologue

### London—1896

Edward Elgar not only felt like a fugitive, he acted like one. He believed his life depended on stealth.

Elgar's mind was no longer on the lecture he had just completed to the aspiring composers at the University of Westminster, nor was he conscious of his own shivers as he bundled his wool greatcoat tightly around his neck and pulled his hat down snugly over his thinning hair. He wasn't as interested in staying warm, protecting himself against the biting December wind that whipped across Paddington Street Gardens, as he was determined to be invisible.

Walking briskly along the east side of the gardens, Elgar kept his head tilted down, obscuring his face as he peered under the brim of his hat, scanning the street in front of him. He kept to the side streets, avoiding the easier walk on the Marylebone High Street in return for the shadows on gas-lit Aybrook Street. Elgar regularly changed directions, glancing over his shoulder each time. At Manchester Square, he completely circled the square once, then half again, searching the shadows for movement and praying for his nerves to quiet.

Building a reputation as a composer, chiefly from his works for the great choral festivals of the English Midlands, Elgar would have felt foolish orchestrating these cloak-and-dagger maneuvers were it not for two things: the break-in at his home in Great Malvern one week ago, in which his study was completely ransacked, and the two knife-wielding assailants who cornered him on a side street three nights earlier after he'd attended a concert at the Crystal Palace. Were it not for the two constables who intervened and captured the foreign-looking criminals, Elgar truly feared he could have lost his life.

And he knew why he feared for his safety. Elgar didn't need to see their amulets to know that the killers were back, that he was their target, and it was critical he contact Sir Charles Warren. Waiting three days for Warren to return from the Continent nearly destroyed Elgar's constitution.

Exiting Manchester Square, Elgar momentarily regretted his decision to help his good friend and renowned English preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, unravel the cipher that protected the mysterious message on that confounded scroll. When Charles dispatched the scroll into the safe-keeping of his colleague Louis Klopsch, the New York City publisher of Spurgeon's evangelical newspaper, both Spurgeon and Elgar felt released from their fear of the men who pursued the scroll—the men with the amulets. Spurgeon returned to preaching in his packed New Park Street Church in London, and Elgar returned to his work composing the *Pomp & Circumstance Marches* and his masterpiece, the "Enigma" Variations. But years ago, just prior to his death, Spurgeon had sent an odd warning for Elgar to notify Warren if his life were ever threatened like this. Combined with the report he recently received about the burglary in Klopsch's New York City home . . . well . . .

The Palestine Exploration Fund, the organization that funded Warren's 1867 excavations under Jerusalem's Temple Mount, occupied a four-story building constructed in the late 1700s in the Marylebone Village, its entrance tucked into the thin, short alley of Hinde Mews that turned off Marylebone Lane. Hard to find, but the rent was reasonable for an organization that Elgar knew was constantly scrabbling to maintain its funding.

After surveying the darkened streets once more, Elgar entered the side door and trundled up the steep stairs, shaking the chill from his coat. The attendant asked his business as he reached the second floor and pointed him up the stairs to the reading room on the third floor, where most of the fund's meetings were held. Elgar found the room warm, well lit, and inviting, a vigorous fire in the generous fireplace keeping out any chill from the expansive windows.

Any Englishman who read a newspaper could have recognized Sir General Charles Warren, who sat hunched deep in a leather armchair that flanked the fireplace. Warren's face was a front-page fixture in the *Times*—and the more disreputable rags that claimed to practice journalism in London—not only for his many heroic military exploits in Africa, but also for his daring, unprecedented explorations under the

Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Then there was Warren's unlikely, but remarkable, three-year tenure as Chief Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police from 1886 to 1888, when he was the lead investigator in the Jack the Ripper murders. Warren's face was often published more than the Queen's.

Elgar crossed the room and extended his hand. "Sir Charles, thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

Warren's face was thinner than Elgar's, but both carried the high forehead of intelligence, the thinning hair of middle age, and the mustache that was nearly obligatory for an English gentleman—though the thick, bristly hedge that overwhelmed Elgar's upper lip was of a different magnitude than Warren's. Starched collar, thick cravat, wool suit, and waistcoat—Elgar's brown; Warren's gray—completed the uniform of the day.

Warren stood and took Elgar's hand. "My pleasure, sir. I've enjoyed your music and was fascinated by your association with Reverend Spurgeon."

"Which is why I am here tonight, I'm afraid." Elgar took off his coat, hung it beside the fireplace, and settled into the leather armchair opposite Warren's. "Charles urged me to contact you if I ever believed—"

"That your life was in danger?"

"How do you know?" Elgar was stunned by Warren's question, but even more shocked by his answer.

"I know, sir, why you believe you are in danger, and I agree with your assessment. When you contacted me, I inquired with a former colleague at the Yard. I know about the break-in at your home and the attempt on your life. I know you've come to me for help and protection. And I also know I'm going to disappoint you."

"But . . . I . . ." Elgar stammered, trying to find traction for his thoughts.

"Mr. Elgar, forgive me. I have looked forward to making your acquaintance. Sadly, it appears to be under strained circumstances, and more so, I have very little time this evening. I fear we will need to be brief and to the point. Please, allow me to begin.

"I met Reverend Spurgeon during my time as commissioner of police, and we continued that relationship until I was assigned to command the garrison in Singapore. During that time we spoke often and at length, both about my experience exploring under Temple Mount in Jerusalem and also about the scroll the two of you deciphered that claimed a third temple had been built and then hidden under Temple Mount prior to the Crusades.

"It is not because of the message on the scroll that you are being hunted, Mr. Elgar—"

"Please, call me Edward."

"Yes . . . thank you . . . It's not the scroll, but rather because of a message contained in the mezuzah itself. A message that confirmed things I had discovered under Temple Mount, things that I have divulged to no one else except Reverend Spurgeon. Two years after Charles died, on my return from Singapore, I took a ship north, crossing the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf to the land route through Persia and Palestine. A longer trip, but necessary to support what Charles and I suspected."

With a momentary look around the room, Warren leaned in and closed the distance to Elgar. The composer became even more nervous.

"I joined an expedition from the British Museum at the site of the ancient city of Babylon in Assyria. My friend Hormuzd Rassam led the expedition. He was looking for cuneiform tablets. What I sought, and found, Edward, you will not be able to verify because the proof is in two far-off places, New York City—protected and safe, we can only hope—and under the sands of the Persian desert.

"I have kept this information in my safe until this night. I believe that you are one of the few living souls who can appreciate and understand its critical importance. Unfortunately, this information, were it to be discovered by others, would only increase the danger under which you now live."

General Warren reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat, revealing to Elgar the pistol that rested in a holster under his left armpit. His anxiety already growing during Warren's comments, Elgar's heartbeat spiked at these last words and the sight of the weapon.

“You should think about getting one for yourself,” Warren whispered. He held out a small envelope and kept it suspended between them until Elgar reluctantly took it in his hand.

“I know you are very fond of ciphers and codes,” said Warren. “On the paper inside this envelope are a series of directions from a point in Babylon to a portal. These directions, if combined with other, coded instructions that were hidden in Spurgeon’s bronze mezuzah, would lead to the most astounding archeological discovery in the history of man. And it’s a discovery which we must never allow to happen.”

Elgar’s mind was as overloaded as it was on the first days of creating a symphony—how he felt as he began work on the “Enigma” Variations, so close to completion after so many years. “But . . . Sir Charles . . . I’ve come to you for help, for protection for both my family and me. These men are now pursuing me.”

Sir General Charles Warren, commander of the Thames District of the British Army, hero of the Boer War, drew himself upright in the leather armchair, facing Elgar directly and unveiling the full magnitude of his military bearing and presence. He leaned in closer to the composer, his voice lower but brimming with authority.

“Mr. Elgar, I sympathize with your plight . . . I do. But what we face today—what Charles and I faced every day since that trip to Persia—is the very real specter of the most powerful and destructive weapon in the history of the world falling into the hands of bloodthirsty killers who would use this weapon not simply to further their nefarious ends. No, these men do not seek riches. What they seek is the destruction of Western civilization as we know it, the subjugation of the Christian world, and the overthrow of its precepts.”

Whether from the heat thrown by the vigorous fire, or from his own growing sense of dread, Elgar was perspiring heavily under his wool suit. His breathing was shallow, and his mind searched the corridors of his wisdom, looking for a door through which to escape the responsibility Warren was entrusting to him.

“I could be reassigned at a moment’s notice,” said the general, “dispatched to a part of the world where those directions would be even more at risk. No, I regret to say Edward: this burden must fall to you. You understand codes and ciphers. Take what I’ve given you and make its secret secure. Use that code you deciphered from the scroll. Whatever you do, Edward, hide this secret and hide it well. If these directions are never deciphered, that would be an acceptable result.”

Elgar was astonished to see the envelope still in his hands. He looked at the fire and wondered if that would not be a better fate for this fearful slip of paper.

“I know,” whispered Warren, close now to Elgar’s shoulder. “I’ve often thought the same thing myself. Why not just destroy it?”

“Why not?”

“It was Reverend Spurgeon,” said Warren. “He convinced me there was a spiritual, supernatural purpose for these directions. That someday, someone would need to know the way. He told me, ‘When the day of reckoning comes, the day evil is defeated will be the day God’s arm will stretch forth, and in his hand will be his power.’”

A chill filled Elgar. “What are these? What are these directions?”

Warren leaned over, took the envelope out of Elgar’s hand, and stuffed it into the inside pocket of Elgar’s jacket. “They lead to the birthplace of man. And to the manifestation of the power of God. Hide them well, my friend.”



The envelope in his jacket pocket felt as if it were burning a hole in his chest as Elgar traveled home by train to Worcestershire and the town of Great Malvern. He was thoroughly exhausted and at his wits end after staying up all night in his London hotel room, working on the cipher. In the carriage from the station, the closer he got to his home, the heavier his burden became. Elgar had no safe at home, no secure place to hide such dangerous information. He recalled hearing someone speak on the advantage of

hiding things in plain sight, but his thoughts were as chaotic and random as discordance theory. Nothing made sense.

Alice was standing on the front steps as the carriage pulled up the drive. He paid the driver, rushed up the steps with his bag in his hand, and barely acknowledged his wife as he hastened inside and went straight to his study. This was the room recently ransacked. What was the chance they would come back to it again? He looked frantically about him as Alice called his name from the doorway. Her steps started down the hall.

Elgar noticed his box of stationary on top of his desk. Of course. In with the note paper and cards, the slip of paper would be nearly invisible. Elgar slit the envelope and took the single sheet of paper in his left hand. With his right, he lifted the lid on the stationary box, thumbed through the contents and, as Alice walked into the study, slipped the paper between two pieces of card stock. He would deal with it later.

“Edward . . . what is wrong with you? You look as if you’ve stared into the face of death.”

## **Part One**

# **Jeremiah's Call**

## 1

**Friday, August 28****Jerusalem****11:30 AM**

Annie could see that guilt consumed more of her husband with every heartbeat, like a ravenous cancer that sucked the life out of his eyes and left flecks of gray that threatened to overwhelm the copper sparkle in his hair. The dead just kept piling up around them—Winthrop and Doc were dead. Now Kallie. Even Annie herself had narrowly escaped the same fate. Tom looked at his hands as if the blood would never wash away. Annie feared that the violence torturing Tom Bohannon's sleep and haunting his days was expanding beyond his capacity to cope.

Relentless, the midday sun was slanting hard through the wisteria that twisted over a wooden trellis tucked into the corner of Rabbi Ronald Fineman's garden in the Nahla'ot section of Jerusalem. A few hours earlier, Annie, Tom, and those dear to Kallie Nolan had endured her funeral service. Emotionally spent, they and their friends were seeking respite from their grief in Rabbi Fineman's garden. But respite was not on the guest list.

Annie kept her eyes on Tom as they all struggled to process what they had just been told by Sam Reynolds

"But who would try to assassinate the president of the United States and the prime minister of Israel, both on the same night?" Tom asked. The last few months had dropped pounds from Bohannon's fifty-eight-year-old body—high anxiety and times of near-starvation had taken a severe toll. Now the awful burden of responsibility along with the weight of regret was evident as his six-foot frame sat hunched over a small table in a corner of the garden. "Who has that kind of power—that kind of reach?"

Under the trellis in Fineman's garden, the shade was full. Tom sat across from Annie, holding her hand. Tom's brother-in-law and sister, Joe and Dierdre Rodriguez, occupied a bench on the far side, Dierdre pressed closely against Rodriguez's side. In the rear, on a raised, shaded section of stone patio, Rabbi Fineman was engaged in hushed but animated conversation with archeologist Brandon McDonough.

"Radical Islam is behind this," said Reynolds, folding his long legs in front of a deck chair as he concluded his update. Despite his loose-limbed, Texas-cowboy looks, Reynolds had the sharp mind and dapper dress of a career diplomat with the U.S. State Department. Annie was grateful that Reynolds had quickly become Tom's friend, ally, and protector over the past several months. "We see the Muslim Brotherhood's hand at work throughout the Middle East. We can only guess how far ISIS reaches. And your guys with the amulet seem to be involved, too."

Annie pulled her hand free from Tom's, shoved her chair back, a bolt of rage driving her to her feet. "God help us. Aren't we ever going to be rid of these people?"

Annie had become a different woman from when she and Kallie were kidnapped by the Prophet's Guard—ever since Kallie had been murdered and she had been rescued on a dark road near Gaza. Her inner peace, which kept her balanced, had been replaced by a flint-sharp edginess and a smoldering reservoir of revenge. She wanted to hurt these people back. "Why can't you guys wipe out the Prophet's Guard and give us our lives back?"

"But . . .," Reynolds stammered.

"But nothing," Annie snapped. "You and the president and all his power have been nothing but bystanders watching from the sidelines as we—as Tom and Joe and Sammy—risked our lives, our families, chasing after the messages on the scroll. We need—"

Another voice, from outside the shade, entered the conversation.

"They were never after the scroll."



Sammy Rizzo stepped under the trellis. About four-feet tall—normally no one could miss the hawk-nosed man with jet-black hair joking with anyone in sight. But today, Rizzo shed his characteristic Hawaiian shirt for a stark black suit and shirt. Sammy's grief—honed by a desired romance that was unlikely and unresolved—was devastatingly obvious to Annie and mirrored her own. She and Kallie bonded quickly during their time together in Jerusalem, becoming almost like sisters. Now her heart wept nearly as much as Rizzo's. His black-rimmed glasses framed red, lifeless eyes. And instead of her quick-thinking, fast-talking young friend, Rizzo looked and moved like an old man.

He walked beside Annie, took her hand in his, and looked up into her face. Knowing the depth of Rizzo's affection for Kallie Nolan, Annie felt her heart nearly break at the sight of Rizzo's crushed spirit.

"We were wrong," Rizzo said. "They wanted what the scroll, the mezuzah, pointed to. And it wasn't the Temple or the Tent. The guys who got me out of the monastery—the Temple Guard guys—they told me what this is all about. They showed me. I think it's why so many have died. Why so many more may die."

Rizzo rubbed Annie Bohannon's hand, his eyes on her fingers. "You know, Kallie was so excited about this treasure hunt of ours she was willing to sacrifice anything to be a part of it."

Annie knelt down on the flagstones and looked directly into his face. "I'm sorry, Sam. It's OK—"

"No! It isn't over," said Rizzo. "What they're after, they'll never stop until they find it or they kill us all."

Annie reached out her right hand and caressed Rizzo's cheek. The edge was still there, but now it was tempered with concern. "Then you and I will stop them, Sammy. You and me, Tom, and Joe, if that's what it takes. God knows I'd rather go home and be normal. But we can't live the rest of our lives like this, running in fear from these killers. And we can't rely on the authorities to keep us safe. Can we, Sam?" She glanced at Reynolds who simply looked down at his polished shoes. "The Prophet's Guard is ruthless and relentless. Richard wasn't safe—they murdered him in Egypt. Kallie wasn't safe. They even went after our daughter, Caitlin, and tried to abduct her as she walked across the Fordham campus."

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"You know, I almost forgot this." Annie turned her head to look at Tom. "If God's hand is in this—and I believe that with all my heart—then he's called us to be in this to the end." No rebuke colored Annie's words, only resignation. She turned her attention back to Rizzo. "No matter what it is that the Prophet's Guard wants."

Rizzo took a deep breath, holding eye contact with Annie. "They want to control the world," he said. "And they think they can use God's power to do that. That's what they're after."

"I don't understand, Sammy," said Joe Rodriguez. "What do you mean, use God's power?"

Rizzo turned his head to face Rodriguez. "They're looking for a weapon," he said.

"I know." Up on the raised section of the patio, Rabbi Fineman and McDonough stood from the table where they had been in rapt conversation. Recruited by circumstance and curiosity, both men were now integral parts of Bohannon's team. The Irishman picked up a large sheet of paper and held it in front of him.

"I was inside a five-thousand-year-old passage tomb commanding a hilltop in County Meath, Ireland, when I traced these images," said McDonough. "They are from the cover of a sarcophagus in what I believe is Jeremiah's tomb." On the sheet of paper were traced two large, angelic beings, their wings upraised, flaming swords held aloft in their hands. Behind the angels stood a huge tree. Below the angels and the tree was a shepherd's staff.

"They are looking for this," said Fineman pointing to the staff. "The most powerful weapon in the history of man."

"And I think I know where we need to look," said McDonough. "In the place where man's history began."

Stunned to silence like the rest of them, Annie could hear the wings of an insect humming in the garden. From inside the house came the voices of Rabbi Fineman's other guests as they made their farewells.

A ringing cell phone shattered the stillness like an unwanted salesman.

She looked to her right, where Reynolds was digging a phone out of his hip pocket.

“I must admit you’ve piqued my interest to hear more about the greatest weapon in the history of man, but”—he raised the still-ringing smart phone—“this is one phone call I’ve got to take. Don’t get into the good stuff until I come back . . . OK?”

Reynolds took two steps out from under the arbor and stopped, his back to the group in the shade. Annie couldn’t hear his part of the conversation, but she could tell it was serious by the way he scrunched his shoulders and bowed his head, as if a great weight was being added to his burden. Reynolds took one more step away from the group, then straightened up and stuck the phone back in his pocket. Hands on his hips, he stood motionless in the sun for a moment and then turned back to the shelter of the arbor.

“I’m sorry. I think I need to hear this story, but I’ve got to go,” said Reynolds. He looked at Annie, but his eyes were distant. “Where will you be tomorrow?”

“Kallie’s, probably,” she said.

“Good. I’ll see you there . . . early.” Reynolds glanced around the group. “And you had better start packing. It’s time to leave.”

Annie’s inner cauldron of rage began to bubble, but before she could object, Reynolds had done an about-face and was out of the garden.

“Good luck with that.” Rizzo took off his jacket and draped it over the back of a chair. Was it defiance or resolve that creased Sammy’s face? “I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “This thing is still not over.”

Bohannon rubbed his temples and snorted. “Maybe it’s not over for you, but I’ve just about had enough.” His words dripped with the poison of regret.

Annie walked over to where Tom was sitting and put her hand on his shoulder. “I think we need to listen.” Her voice was firm, but her words were a plea. “We at least need to listen.”

Rabbi Fineman stepped into the midst of the group, rubbing the yarmulke that covered the thinning hair swept back over his head. “Let’s go inside,” he said, glancing in Annie’s direction. “Get out of the heat. I think it best that we all get a bit more comfortable. This is going to be a long story.”



Fineman’s wife was in the kitchen, washing dishes. The rest of the house was empty, the rabbi’s guests having departed one by one in his absence. The team gathered in his small parlor, a well-worn air conditioner trying valiantly to defeat the afternoon heat. Bohannon paced in the confined space.

“You’re telling me that we never understood what this was all about, not even from the beginning?” Tom Bohannon had believed he could never be surprised again. After all they had discovered and endured over the last few months, after all their amazing and awful experiences, nothing would ever come as a surprise.

But now he was stunned by what he heard from his colleagues.

“I do not believe it was possible for us to understand,” said Professor Brandon McDonough. He stood holding a large piece of tracing paper in front of him. “We did not have the full story . . . probably still don’t have the full story. But now that we have more of the pieces, well, I’d say we’re moving closer to the truth.”

“So why don’t one of you,” said Bohannon, sweeping a hand in the general direction of the rabbi, McDonough, and Rizzo, “tell us what’s going on? You three seem to possess some information that the rest of us haven’t been able to figure out.” Bohannon threw himself into a soft, upholstered chair but perched on the edge as if he was waiting to be launched.

“Well, Tom, you have to understand that for more than a thousand years, only a handful of people have understood the true story behind the mezuzah and the scroll.” Rabbi Fineman sat on the sofa opposite Bohannon, his hands entwined, his face a roadmap of wrinkled concern. “You can’t blame yourself for not seeing the truth—as if that would have made any difference in the things that have happened.”

“You and McDonough figured it out.” Bohannon flung the words into the crowded parlor as an indictment. “I should have seen it. I should have figured it out. Maybe then . . . maybe then . . .”

“Maybe what?” Carrying a plate of sandwiches, Annie walked in from greeting Mrs. Fineman in the kitchen and sat on the arm of the upholstered chair. She put her arm around her husband’s shoulders, but her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “And maybe then Doc wouldn’t be dead? Maybe Kallie would still be alive?”

Self-pity rode into Tom’s heart on the back of Annie’s words, slicing deep into his confidence. He was the leader. It was his fault.

Twice over the last three months, Bohannon had been torn from his position as executive director of the Bowery Mission in New York City and thrown into a maelstrom of geopolitical crisis and intrigue in the Middle East. The first time, his unlikely team of archeologists and amateur adventurers had thrust themselves into dangerous and uncharted waters to chase down a secret message decoded from an ancient scroll. Their friend and colleague Winthrop Larsen was massacred by a Prophet’s Guard car bomb in New York City, and the rest of them had nearly died in the caverns underneath Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. The second time, Bohannon and his team were relentlessly recruited by the president of the United States to pursue any additional clues on the ancient scroll or the mezuzah that carried it.

While the inscrutable brass mezuzah finally did reveal a second secret that led to the discovery of the biblical Tent of Meeting in a desert cave along Scorpion Pass in the Negev, the cost of the adventure had been devastating.

Dr. Richard Johnson, former chair of the Antiquities College at Columbia University, was murdered by the Prophet’s Guard in a fourth-century monastery in the Red Sea desert of Egypt, where Sammy Rizzo narrowly escaped with his life; Kallie Nolan and Annie Bohannon were kidnapped in Jerusalem by the same group of Muslim fanatics; Tom and Sammy were part of a head-long race by Israeli soldiers who intercepted the fleeing kidnappers—but not in time to save Kallie Nolan’s life; Joe Rodriguez, shackled as a prisoner after unearthing the Tent of Meeting, watched in horror as Muslim fighters massacred a troop of Israeli soldiers on top of Temple Mount and desecrated and torched the ancient Tent and then the entire Mount platform was destroyed once again—this time by a pillar of fire.

That was just the personal cost.

An improbable peace treaty between Israel and its Arab neighbors had been shattered as deeply as the Temple Mount; tension between Israel and Islam had risen to epic proportions; the Muslim Brotherhood was pursuing and consolidating power throughout the Middle East; the Israeli government of Prime Minister Eliazar Baruk was crumbling at just the time Israel was desperate for capable, moderate leadership; and an ultimate conflict over control of the Temple Mount appeared to be inevitable.

Now, Bohannon was being told that his quest to decode the sacred scroll and unlock the mysteries of the brass mezuzah—which led to the discovery of an eleventh-century Jewish temple constructed under the Temple Mount and, later, unearthing of the original Tent of Meeting—was not the objective of the relentless, murderous pursuit of the Prophet’s Guard.

Tom’s eyes flashed with anger as he looked up at his wife. “And maybe Jerusalem wouldn’t have been devastated by an earthquake and thousands killed. Maybe . . .” He shook his head and looked around the room.

McDonough, and Fineman sat alongside each other on the sofa, as mismatched a pair as one could imagine. Dr. Brandon McDonough, provost of Trinity College in Dublin, was round and portly—stereotypically Irish—while Rabbi Ronald Fineman, a messianic rabbi from New York City who had befriended Bohannon and his team in Jerusalem, was long and thin. Joe Rodriguez left his wife, Deirdre, on an inhospitable futon and forced his six-four body into a sitting position next to Rizzo on the floor. Rodriguez was speaking softly into Rizzo’s ear while Sammy, his eyes downcast, absently folded and unfolded a piece of paper.

Bohannon brought his attention back to the rabbi on the sofa. “Maybe I haven’t had a clue about the ultimate meaning of what we’ve found, and what we’ve experienced. But I do know it’s important. And I suppose I’m not surprised there’s more to come. So why don’t you—all of you—tell us what you know. Then maybe we’ll have some idea of what to do next.”

Fineman looked left and right, his goatee bobbing on the end of his chin, sighed, and unfolded his hands as if opening a book.

“Three pieces are woven together,” he said. “You know the first two, the mezuzah and the scroll—one ancient code after another concealing secrets as old as the Bible. But there is a third piece to this labyrinthine puzzle, a piece that leads to the weapon, a piece that burst into my consciousness just this afternoon. Let’s start with the book. You need to know about the book, and then we can move on.”

Bohannon was puzzled. First there was a weapon. Now there was a book. “What book?”

The response came from the floor. “A book I was shown in the Egyptian desert.”

Rizzo didn’t raise his head. He kept his focus on the folded paper in his hands, and as he unfolded it once more, Tom noticed that it was the four-page memorial pamphlet distributed at the funeral service. Kallie’s picture was on the cover.

“It’s a book with all the answers,” said Rizzo.

## 2

### **The Egyptian Desert Eight Days Earlier**

It was a large cavern, well away from the sandstorm that wailed across the cave opening on the desert ridge far above. Dual-mantle, gas-fired lanterns not only lit up the space but also added heat that kept the dampness at bay. Within the cavern resided a small tent city—canvas-covered, sparsely populated, adobe-walled structures randomly scattered around the circumference of the cavern; a larger, open-sided tent in the middle of the space; a cooking pit in the center with tables flanking its sides. A dog barked off to the left. The rich, thick aroma of hay and animal stalls hovered in the open space. Straight ahead, as the Jeep carrying Rizzo and his two rescuers entered the cavern, was the community’s main structure—an adobe building the size of a large church—the headquarters of the Temple Guard.

The two guard members in the front of the Jeep were both dressed in the iconic outfits that appeared to identify their members—red-checked keffiyeh held in place by two black ropes, their ends trailing onto the leather vest they wore over white, muslin shirts. Well-worn, blousy blue pants, kept in place by a wide red sash, were tucked into calf-high leather boots. The leader, Hassan, pulled the Jeep in front of the main building. He turned in his seat.

“Welcome to our modest home,” said Hassan. “Few have seen this place who are not of the guardians.”

The night before, Hassan and his cousin had rescued Rizzo from St. Anthony’s Monastery in the eastern Sahara Desert and from the clutches of the assassins of the Prophet’s Guard who murdered Doc and had the same plans for Rizzo. Through the night, their Jeep had raced across the desert, reaching this cave moments before a sandstorm obliterated visibility.

Hassan jumped out of the Jeep and picked up the book that rested between the front seats, the book they had rescued from St. Anthony’s Monastery along with Rizzo. “Come, we will show you what you seek to know.”

Both Hassan and his cousin had a rifle slung over their shoulder, a bandolier of cartridges strapped across their chest, and a short scimitar tucked into the sash.

In any other circumstance, in spite of the weapons, Sammy would have been comforted by the genuine warmth and concern that radiated from Hassan's face. A black moustache, the size of a forest, exploded under his prodigious nose and dropped off each side of his mouth to frame his chin. His eyes were as black as the ocean depths but filled with the fire of life and a gladness of spirit. A ragged, screaming pink scar ran from his left cheek, across the eyebrow of his left eye, above his nose, and across his brow until it disappeared beneath the keffiyeh.

But in this circumstance, with Doc's lifeless body left lying in that cold, monk's cell, there was comfort neither in Rizzo's escape nor in his rescuers.

"I don't care what you have to show me," said Rizzo, dragging his battered body from the Jeep. "It just doesn't matter anymore."

"Perhaps. Come," said Hassan. He put one hand on Rizzo's shoulder and led him into the great hall.

Inside, Hassan turned to the left and entered a small, low-ceilinged room. In the center was a wooden table, a book resting on a stand in the middle of the table, enclosed in what looked like a glass box. Hassan laid down the book he brought from the Jeep, lifted the glass, removed the other book and put it beside the first. Rizzo pushed up against the top of the table to get a better look.

Like an archeologist sifting sand, looking for a buried treasure, Hassan caressed open a page of one book then did the same to the other. With the utmost care he turned page after page. Suddenly, with an audible sigh, he stopped and turned to his cousin. "They are identical, in what they contain and in what they are missing. We are no closer to the answer."

In spite of his despair and the bruises inflicted by the ancient Jeep as it careened across the desert, Rizzo was drawn to the futile resignation of Hassan's words.

"What's this all about?" asked Rizzo, looking up at the man in the red-checked keffiyeh. "Why have you brought me here?"

"Because of this . . . these books," said Hassan, waving a hand at the leather-bound books on the table. "You and your friends have been searching. This is what you have been looking for. Here . . . let's sit." Hassan's cousin dragged a wooden bench from the corner of the room up to the edge of the table and then left the room.

"Both the Prophet's Guard and Temple Guard possess copies of this book," said Hassan. "They are incomplete copies. Combined with what we know of the mezuzah and the scroll, these books have kept us locked in relentless battle with the Prophet's Guard for nearly a thousand years. Here. Let me explain."

Hassan swept the red-checked keffiyeh from his head and dropped it on the table. Scratching his head, he settled into the corner of the bench. Rizzo hopped up into the opposite corner.

"More than nine hundred years ago, some Crusaders came to St. Anthony's monastery. Part of a lay order, the Brotherhood of Saint Anthony, they were on a pilgrimage to fulfill a vow. But they brought with them a scroll holder, or mezuzah, which they left at the monastery.

"The Coptic monks who occupied the monastery knew the scroll was written in Demotic, an ancient Egyptian language, but none of them could decipher what was on the scroll. Two hundred years later, another pilgrim made his way to the monastery, a Coptic skilled in ancient languages and a lover of puzzles. It took five years, but this man broke the code and revealed the message."

Rizzo was startled. "You know . . . they knew?"

"You are not the only men to solve this puzzle. The monks of Saint Anthony's monastery knew for seven hundred years there was a Jewish temple hidden under the sacred mount in Jerusalem."

"But why not reveal the secret?" Rizzo asked, his mind rebelling at the new information.

"How? They were here, stuck in the desert. Who would they tell? Jerusalem was over three hundred kilometers away, a two-month journey. So instead, they hid the mezuzah and its scroll in a small crypt carved into the foundation of the library building.

“Ultimately, the few brother monks who knew of the mezuzah formed a group of guardians; the Temple Guardians they called themselves. They swore on their faith in the cross of the Christ to protect the scroll, its mezuzah, and its message—to keep it a secret until the right moment, the right time to reveal the existence of this hidden temple.

“But . . . the monastery is isolated. Even after the monks built their massive, defensive walls, St. Anthony’s was an inviting target for bandits and nomadic Bedouins. Soon the Temple Guardians became more warriors than monks, determined to keep the mezuzah safe—and secret.

“Eventually, knowledge of the mezuzah and the scroll—most importantly, of its message—came to a follower of Islam. No wall could deter that man and his Muslim brothers. The scroll’s message was a threat to the Haram al-Sharif if knowledge of a hidden temple became known. These Muslim men also took a vow, to serve the defiled cross. A Coptic cross, like ours, with a lightning bolt slashing through on the diagonal.

“These warriors, who called themselves the Prophet’s Guard, attacked the monastery, massacred the monks, and stole the mezuzah.”

Rizzo was looking down at his boots, swinging his legs back and forth as his mind tried to assimilate this new information. A critical question crashed into his thoughts. “Wait . . . once the Prophet’s Guard got a hold of the mezuzah, why not destroy it? Get rid of the evidence?”

Hassan nodded his head. “A shrewd question, my friend. Destroying the mezuzah and its scroll would have solved one problem. But there is much about the mezuzah we have yet to learn, other clues to an ultimate secret all of us still seek. So our enemies hid the mezuzah while they continued their search.”

But,” said Rizzo, “I thought the Temple Guard brought the mezuzah to the Bibliotheca de Historique in Suez?”

Outside in the larger cavern, a dog barked. Hassan lifted his head, peering out the entrance to the small chamber as if looking through the thousand years.

“Many generations have killed and pillaged in pursuit of the scroll,” said Hassan, “and it changed hands many times. Nearly two hundred years ago, my ancestors of the Temple Guard captured the mezuzah once more and took it to the French for safekeeping, where it was held in great secrecy, where they thought it was safe. But the Prophet’s Guard once again learned of its hiding place and raided the Scroll Room, killing many of my brothers. For over one hundred years, we heard nothing of the scroll, though we monitored the movements of the Prophet’s Guard closely. It wasn’t long before we discovered they no longer possessed the scroll, either. We thought it was lost to us forever.”

Rizzo ran his mind through the rest of the story—how Charles Spurgeon purchased the mezuzah and its printed silk cover while wandering the streets of Alexandria; how the Prophet’s Guard followed its trail to London; how Spurgeon dispatched the hunted mezuzah to his friend Louis Klopsch at the Bowery Mission in New York City.

He looked around the nearly empty room, turned to look out the door into the bleak reaches of the cavern. “And you’ve been living here for a hundred years . . . waiting?”

Hassan shook his head, a smile rising under his mountainous mustache. “No, I’m afraid we’re not that gallant. A few months ago we received word that the Prophet’s Guard was once again on the move in pursuit of the scroll. A call went out to my brothers of the undefiled Coptic cross, who began to gather here in hope.”

But an overriding question kept interrupting Rizzo’s thoughts.

“But why do you still care? What difference does it make to you, or to the Prophet’s Guard, who has the scroll? Not only has the message been deciphered, but the temple has been found and destroyed. What good is the scroll to you? Why . . . why are you here?”

Hassan’s smile held no warmth. “It is not only the scroll we seek. In that you are correct. But there is a greater treasure, a treasure of which you have not dreamed.” He turned toward the table, lifted one of the books, and pulled it close. “A treasure whose secret may be held within these books.”