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Written by Raymond Khoury

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THE TEMPLAR SALVATION



Raymond Khoury

Prologue

✠

Constantinople

July 1203

Stay low, and keep quiet," the grizzled man whispered as he helped the knight clamber onto the walkway. "The ramparts are swarming with guards, and this siege has them on edge."

Everard of Tyre glanced left and right, scanning the darkness for any sign of a threat. There was no one around. The towers to either side were distant, the flickering torches of the night watches manning them barely visible in the moonless night. The Keeper had chosen their entry point well. If they acted fast, there was a reasonable chance they could scale the rest of the fortifications and make their way into the city unnoticed.

Making it back out safely—that was a different matter.

He yanked on the rope three times to signal the five knight-brothers who waited below, in the shadows of the great outer wall. One by one, they climbed up the knotted rope, the last one of them pulling it up behind him. With their swords now unsheathed and clenched tightly in their calloused hands, they slithered across the rampart in a silent single file, following their host. The rope was unwound, this time down the side of the inner wall. Minutes later, they'd all touched solid ground and were trailing a man none of them had ever met, advancing into a city in which they'd never set foot.

They crouched low, uncertain of where the Keeper was leading them, wary of being spotted. They wore black surcoats over dark tunics instead of their traditional white mantles, the ones bearing the distinctive red, splayed cross. There was no need for them to announce their true identity. Not when traveling through enemy territory, and even less when sneaking into a city that was under siege by Pope Innocent's crusaders. After all, *they* were crusaders. To the people of Constantinople, the Templars were the pope's men. They were the enemy. And Everard was fully aware of the grisly fate that awaited knights who were captured behind enemy lines.

But the warrior-monk didn't consider the Byzantines the enemy, and he wasn't here at the pope's behest.

Far from it.

Christian against Christian, he thought as they slipped past a church that was closed for the night. *Is there no end to this insanity*?

Their journey had been long, and arduous. They had ridden with only the briefest of pauses for days, exhausting their horses to near-death. The message that had come from the Keepers, deep inside the Byzantine capital, was unexpected—and alarming. The city of Zara, on the Dalmatian coast, had been inexplicably sacked by the pope's army—inexplicably, given that it was a Christian city, and not just a Christian city, but a *Catholic* one at that. The Venetian fleet ferrying the rapacious men of the Fourth Crusade was on the move again. Constantinople was their next target, ostensibly to restore its deposed and blinded emperor, and his son, to the throne. And given that the Byzantine capital wasn't even Catholic, but Greek Orthodox—and given the massacre that had taken place there a couple of decades earlier—the portents for the city didn't look promising.

And so Everard and his brother-knights had left the Templar stronghold at Tortosa in a great rush. They had ridden north all the way up the coast, then west, crossing through unfriendly Cilician Armenian and Muslim Seljuk territory, navigating across the arid moonscapes of Cappadocia, steering clear from any settlements and towns, doing their best to avoid confrontation. By the time they reached the environs of Constantinople, the crusader fleet—more than two hundred galleys and horse transports under the command of the formidable Doge of Venice himself—was well entrenched in the waters surrounding the greatest city of its time.

The siege was on.

Time was running out.

They sheltered in the shadows while a patrol of footmen trudged past, then they followed the Keeper through a small cemetery to a thicket of trees where a horse-drawn wagon awaited them. Another graying man, one whose solemn expression couldn't mask a deep unease, waited alongside it, holding the reins. *The second of three*, Everard thought as he gave him a small nod, while his men climbed into the back. They were soon advancing deep into the city, affording the burly knight an occasional glance through the narrow slit in the wagon's canvas cover.

He had never seen such a place.

Even in the near-darkness, he could make out the hulking silhouettes of the soaring churches and monumental palaces that were of a scale he hadn't imagined possible. The sheer number of them was astounding. Rome, Paris, Venice . . . he'd had the good fortune to visit them all, years earlier, while accompanying his grand master on a trip to the Paris Temple. They all paled by comparison. The New Rome was indeed the greatest city of them all. And when the wagon finally reached its destination, the sight that greeted him was no less awe-inspiring: a magnificent structure fronted by a soaring Corinthian colonnade, its pediment disappearing high overhead in the near-darkness.

The third Keeper, the eldest among them, was waiting for them at the top of the edifice's grand stairs.

"What is this place?" Everard asked him.

"The imperial library," the man nodded.

Everard's expression flagged his surprise. The *imperial* library?

The Keeper caught it and his face lightened up with the merest hint of a grin. "Where best to hide something than in plain sight?" He turned and headed in. "Follow me. We don't have much time."

The older men escorted the knights up the flight of steps, through the entrance vestibule, and deep into the cavernous building. The halls were deserted. The hour was late, but it was more than that. The tension in the city was palpable. The humid night air was heavy with fear, a fear that was stoked by the uncertainty and confusion that only got worse with every new day.

They pressed on by torchlight, passing the vast scriptoriums that held most of the knowledge of the ancient world, shelves upon shelves of scrolls and codices that included texts salvaged from the long-lost library of Alexandria. They went down a spiral stairway at the very back of the building

and through a labyrinth of narrow passages and more stairs, their shadows creeping along the speckled limestone walls, until they reached an unlit corridor that was lined with a series of heavy doors. One of the hosts unlocked the door at the farthest end of the passage and led them inside. It was a large storeroom, one of many, Everard imagined. It was cluttered with crates, its walls lined with cobwebbed shelves that housed scrolls and leather-bound codices. The air was musty and stale, but cool. Whoever built this place had known that humidity had to be kept at bay if the parchment and vellum manuscripts were going to survive. And they had—for centuries.

Which was why Everard and his men were there.

"The news isn't good," the eldest of the Keepers told them. "The usurper Alexius lacks the courage to take on the enemy. He rode out with forty divisions yesterday, but didn't dare engage the Franks and the Venetians. He couldn't get back inside the gates fast enough." The old man paused, his eyes despondent. "I fear the worst. The city is as good as lost, and once it falls . . ."

Everard could already imagine the vengeance that would be taken out on the city's nervous inhabitants if the Latins ever breached their defenses.

It had only been twenty years or so since the Latins of Constantinople had been massacred. Men, women, children . . . no one had been spared. Thousands upon thousands of them, wiped out in a murderous frenzy the likes of which hadn't been seen since the taking of Jerusalem in the First Crusade. Venetian, Genoese, and Pisan merchants and their families who had long settled in Constantinople and who controlled its seafaring trade and its finances—the entire Roman Catholic population of the city—had been slaughtered in a sudden upwelling of anger and resentment by the envious local population. Their quarters had been reduced to ash, their graves upturned, any survivors sold off as slaves to the Turks. The city's Catholic clergy didn't fare better at the hands of their Greek Orthodox enemies: Their churches were burned, and the pope's representative was publicly beheaded before his head was tied to a dog's tail and dragged through the city's blood-soaked streets in front of a jubilant crowd.

The old man turned and led the knights deeper into the storeroom, to a second door, which was partially hidden by some heavily laden shelves. "The Franks and the Latins talk about taking back Jerusalem, but you and I both know that they'll never get that far," he said as he fidgeted with the

door's locks. "And in any case, they're not really out to reclaim the Holy Sepulchre. Not anymore. They only thing they care about now is lining their pockets. And the pope would like nothing more than to see this empire fall and have its church brought under the authority of Rome." He turned, his expression darkening. "It's been long said that only the angels in Heaven know the date of the ending of our great city. I fear they're not the only ones to know it now. The pope's men will take Constantinople," he told the knights. "And when they do, I have little doubt that there'll be a small contingent of them whose sole task will be to lay their hands on these."

He swung the door open and led them in. The room was bare, save for three large wooden chests.

Everard's heartbeat spiked. As one of the chosen few within the highest echelons of the Order, he knew what lay within the simple, unadorned trunks. He also knew what he now had to do.

"You'll need the wagon and the horses, and Theophilus will help you again," the old man continued, glancing to acknowledge the youngest of the three Keepers, the one who had helped Everard and his men sneak into the city. "But we'll need to be quick. Things could change at any moment. There's even talk of the emperor fleeing the city. You need to be on your way by first light."

"'You' . . . ?" Everard was surprised by the man's words. "What about you? You're all coming with us, aren't you?"

The elder exchanged a mournful look with his cohorts, then shook his head. "No. We need to cover your trail. Let the pope's men think that what they were after is still here long enough to make sure you're clear of any danger."

Everard wanted to object, but he could see that the Keepers wouldn't be swayed. They'd always known that a time like this might happen. They'd been prepared for it, as had every generation of Keepers before them.

The knights lugged the chests onto the wagon, one at a time, four of them hefting each heavy load while two others stood guard. By the time they had set off, the first hints of dawn were seeping into the night sky.

The gate that the Keepers had chosen, the Gate of the Spring, was one of the more remote entries into the city. It was flanked by two towers but also had a smaller postern to one side of the main gates, which was where they were headed.

As the heavily laden wagon driven by two cloaked figures clattered toward it, three footmen converged to block its path, eyeing it curiously.

One of them raised his hand in a blocking gesture and asked, "Who goes there?"

Theophilus, who was at the reins, let out a pained cough before mumbling a low reply, saying they urgently needed to get to the Zoodochos monastery that was just beyond the gates. Seated next to him, Everard watched in silence as the Keeper's words did the trick and seemed to intrigue the guard, who moved closer and spat out another question.

From under the cowl of his dark tunic, the Templar watched the man approaching them and waited until he was close enough before launching himself onto him and plunging his dagger deep into the guard's neck. In the same instant, three knights rushed out of the back of the wagon and silenced the other guards before they could sound the alert.

"Go," Everard hissed as his brothers rushed to the gatehouse, while he and two of the knights crouched down and scanned the towers overhead. He motioned for Theophilus to sneak away into cover, as they had agreed. The old man's work was done, and this was no place for him; Everard knew all hell could break loose at any second—which it did when two more guards emerged from the gatehouse just as the knights had pulled off the first of the crossbars.

The Templars recovered their swords and cut the guards down with stunning efficiency, but not before one of them had yelped out loudly enough to alert his companions in the towers. Within seconds, lanterns and torches were moving frenetically on the ramparts as alerts were sounded. Everard darted a look at the gate and saw that his brothers were still working on loosening the last of the crossbars—just as arrows bit into the parched ground next to him and by the hooves of the wagon's horses, narrowly missing one of them. There was no time to lose. If one of the horses were to be felled, their escape would be scuttled.

"We have to move," he roared as he loosed a bolt from his crossbow, hitting a backlit archer high above and sending him tumbling down from the rampart. Everard and the two knights alongside him reloaded and fired again, spewing bolts upward, keeping the sentries at bay, until one of the knights yelled and the gates creaked open.

"Let's go," Everard shouted as he waved his men on—and as they scrambled to get back on the wagon, a bolt slammed into the knight by

his side, thudding downward into his right shoulder and lodging itself deep into his chest cavity. The man—Odo of Ridefort, an ox of a man—crumbled to the ground, blood spurting out of him.

Everard darted over to him and helped him back onto his feet, calling out to the others. Within seconds, they were all over their wounded brother-knight, three of them firing upward defensively while the others helped him into the back of the wagon. With the archers covering him, Everard sprinted to the front, and as he climbed onto the bench seat, he turned to shoot a parting nod of gratitude to Theophilus—but the Keeper wasn't where he'd last seen him. Then he spotted him—a short distance away, down on the ground, motionless, an arrow through his neck. He glanced at him for no more than a solitary heartbeat, but it was still long enough for the sight to brand itself permanently into his consciousness—then he leapt onto the wagon and whipped the horses to life.

The other knights clambered on board as the wagon charged through the gates and out of the city under a deluge of arrows. As Everard guided it up a hillock before turning north, he cast his eye over the glistening sea below and the war galleys that were gliding past the city's walls, banners and pennants flying from their sterncastles, shields uncovered, bulwarks garnished, ladders and mangonels raised threateningly.

Insanity, he thought again with a pained heart as he left behind the sublime city and the great catastrophe that would soon be upon it.

✣ ✣ ✣

THE ROAD BACK WAS SLOWER. They'd recovered their horses, but the cumbersome wagon and its heavy payload were holding them back. Avoiding towns and any human contact was more difficult than when they were just on horses and could roam away from the well-trodden trails. Worse still was that Odo was losing a lot of blood, and there was little they could to stop the bleeding while charging ahead. Worst of all was the fact that they weren't traveling incognito anymore: Their exit from the besieged city hadn't been as discreet as their entry. Armed men—ones from outside the city walls this time—would be coming after them.

And sure enough, before the first day's sun had set, they did.

Everard had sent two knights ahead of the wagon and two others behind, early-warning scouts for any threats. That first evening, his prescience paid off. The convoy's rear guard spotted a company of Frankish knights,

thundering in from the west, hot on their tail. Everard sent a rider ahead to bring back the forward scouts before cutting away from the more obvious, and well-trodden, southeasterly route the crusaders would expect them to take and heading farther east, into the mountains.

It was summer, and although the snows had melted, the bleak landscape was still tough to navigate. Lush, rolling hills soon gave way to steep, craggy mountains. The few trails that the wagon could take were narrow and perilous, some of them barely wider than the track of its wooden wheels and skirting the edges of dizzying ravines. And with every new day, Odo's condition worsened. The onset of heavy rain turned an already terrible situation into an accursed one, but with no other options, Everard kept his men to the high ground whenever he could and trudged on, slowly, eating whatever they could forage or kill, filling up their gourds in the downpours, forced to stop when the light faded, spending the miserable nights without shelter, always tense in the knowledge that their pursuers were still out there, looking for them.

We have to make it back, he thought, ruing the wretched upheaval that had been heaped upon him and his brothers without warning. *We cannot fail. Not when so much is at stake.*

It was easier willed than done.

After several days of sluggish progress, Odo's condition was desperate. They'd managed to remove the arrow and stem the bleeding, but a fever had set in, the result of his infected wound. Everard knew they'd have to stop and find a way to keep him immobile and dry for a few days if he were to have any chance of making it back to their stronghold alive. But with the scouts confirming that their stalkers hadn't yet given up, they had to soldier on through the hostile terrain and hope for a miracle.

Which was what they found on the sixth day, in the shape of a small, isolated hermitage.

They would have missed it entirely, had it not been for a pair of hooded crows that were circling above it and drew the ravenous eyes of one of the forward scouts. A tight cluster of rooms carved out of the rock face, the monastery was virtually undetectable and perfectly camouflaged, high up in the mountains, tucked into the crook of the cliff that towered protectively above it.

The knights rode as close as they could, then left the horses and the wagon and climbed the rest of the way up the rock-strewn incline. Everard

marveled at the dedication of the men who had built the monastery in such a remote and treacherous location—from the looks of it, many centuries ago—and wondered how it had survived in the region, given the roaming bands of Seljuk warriors.

They approached it with caution, swords drawn, although they doubted anyone could possibly be living in such an inhospitable spot. To their amazement, they were greeted by a dozen or so monks, weathered old men and younger disciples who quickly recognized them as fellow followers of the Cross and offered them food and shelter.

The monastery was small, but well stocked for a place that was so far removed from the nearest settlement. Odo was comfortably settled into a dry cot, some hot food and drink helping rekindle his body's worn defenses. Everard and his men then lugged the three chests up the hill and placed them in a small windowless room. Next door to it was an impressive scriptorium that housed a large collection of bound manuscripts. A handful of scribes were busy at their desks, concentrating on their work, barely looking up to acknowledge their visitors.

The monks—Basilian, as the knights soon found out—were stunned by the news the knights brought with them. The idea of the pope's army besieging fellow Christians and sacking Christian cities, even given the great schism, was hard to fathom. Isolated as they were, the monks hadn't been aware of the loss of Jerusalem to Saladin, or of the failed Third Crusade. Their hearts sank and their brows furrowed under the repeated blows of new information.

Throughout their conversation, Everard had carefully glossed over one tricky issue: what he and his fellow Templars were doing in Constantinople, and what their role had been in the siege of the great city. He was aware that, in the eyes of these Orthodox monks, he and his men could easily be seen as part of the Latin forces that were poised at the gates of their capital. And related to that was an even trickier issue, which the monastery's *hegumen*—its abbot, Father Philippicus—finally chose to address.

"What is it you carry in those chests?"

Everard could see that the monks had eyed the crates curiously, and he wasn't sure what to reply. After a moment's hesitation, he said, "Your guess is as good as mine. I was simply ordered to transport them from Constantinople to Antioch."

The abbot held his gaze, mulling over his reply. After an uncomfortable

moment, he nodded respectfully and rose to his feet. "It's time for vespers, and then we should retire. We can speak more in the morning."

The knights were offered more bread, cheese, and cups of aniseed in boiled water, then the monastery fell silent for the night, save for the uninterrupted drumming of a patch of rain against the windows. The light staccato must have helped smother Everard's unease, as he soon drifted off into a deep sleep.

He woke up to harsh sunlight assaulting his senses. He sat up, but felt groggy, his eyelids heavy, his throat uncomfortably dry. He looked around—the two knights who'd been sharing the room with him weren't there.

He tried to get up, but faltered, his limbs wobbly and weak. A jar of water and a small bowl sat invitingly by the door. He pushed himself to his feet and shuffled over, raised the jar and drained its contents, feeling better for the drink. Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, he straightened up and headed for the refectory—but quickly sensed something wrong.

Where are the others?

His nerves now on edge, he crept barefoot across the cold flagstones, past a couple of cells and the refectory, all of which were empty. He heard some noise coming from the direction of the scriptorium and headed that way, his body feeling unusually weak, his legs shaking uncontrollably. As he passed the entry to the room where they'd placed the chests, a thought struck him. He paused, then crept into the room, his senses tingling wildly now—a sense of dread now confirmed by what he saw.

The chests had been pried open, their locks yanked out of their mountings.

The monks knew what was in them.

A wave of nausea rocked him, and he leaned against the wall to steady himself. He summoned any energy he could draw on and pushed himself back out of the room and into the scriptorium.

The sight that swam through his distorted vision froze him in place.

His brothers were strewn across the floor of the large room, lying in awkward, unnatural poses, immobile, their faces rigid with the icy pallor of death. There was no blood, no signs of violence. It was as if they had simply stopped living, as if life had been calmly siphoned out of them. The monks stood behind them in a macabre semicircle, staring at Everard blankly through hooded eyes, with the abbot, Father Philippicus, at their center.

And as Everard's legs shook under him, he understood.

"What have you done?" he asked, the words sticking in his throat. "What have you given me?"

He lashed out at the abbot, but fell to his knees before he had even taken a step. He propped himself up with his arms and concentrated hard, trying to make sense of what had happened. He realized they must have all been drugged the night before. The aniseed drink—that had to be it. Drugged, to allow the monks some undisturbed time to explore the contents of the chests. Then in the morning—the water. It had to have been poisoned, Everard knew, as he clenched his belly, reeling from spasms of pain. His vision was tunneling, his fingers shivering uncontrollably. He felt as if his gut had been garroted and set aflame.

"What have you done?" the Templar hissed again, his words slurred, his tongue feeling leaden now inside his parched mouth.

Father Philippicus came forward and just stood there, towering over the fallen knight, his face locked tight with resolve. "The Lord's will," he answered simply as he raised his hand and moved it slowly, first up and down, then sideways, his limp fingers tracing the sign of the cross in the blurry air between them.

It was the last thing Everard of Tyre ever saw.

Chapter 1

✠

Istanbul, Turkey

Present day

Salam, Professor. *Ayah vaght darid keh ba man sohbat bo konid?*"

Behrouz Sharafi stopped and turned, surprised. The stranger who'd called out to him—a darkly handsome, elegant man, mid to late thirties, tall and slim, black gelled-back hair, charcoal roll-neck under a dark suit—was leaning against a parked car. The man flicked him a small wave from a folded newspaper in his hand, confirming the professor's uncertain gaze. Behrouz adjusted his glasses and regarded the man. He was pretty sure he'd never met him, but the stranger was clearly a fellow Iranian—his Farsi accent was perfect. Which was unexpected. Behrouz hadn't met a lot of Iranians since arriving in Istanbul just over a year ago.

The professor hesitated, then, egged on by the stranger's expectant and inviting look, took a few steps toward him. It was a mild early evening, and the square outside the university was winding down from its daily bustle.

"I'm sorry, have we—"

"No, we haven't met," the stranger confirmed as he extended an inviting arm out, shepherding the professor to the passenger car door he'd just opened for him.

Behrouz stopped, tense with a sudden, crippling unease. Being in Is-

tanbul had been, up to that very instant, a liberating experience. With each passing day, the looking-over-your-shoulder, worrying-about-what-you-said tensions of daily life as a Sufi professor at Tehran University had withered away. Far from the political struggles that were strangling academia in Iran, the forty-seven-year-old historian had been enjoying his new life in a country that was less insular and less dangerous, a country that was hoping to join the European Union. A stranger in a dark suit inviting him to take a ride had obliterated that little pipe dream in a heartbeat.

The professor raised his hands, open-palmed. "I'm sorry, I don't know who you are and this—"

Again, the stranger interrupted him with the same courteous, non-threatening tone. "Please, Professor. I apologize for this rather sudden approach, but I do need to have a word with you. It's about your wife and your daughter. They could be in danger."

Behrouz felt twin spikes of fear and anger inside him. "My wife and—What about them? What are you talking about?"

"Please," the man said without a trace of alarm in his voice. "Everything will be fine. But we really need to talk."

Behrouz glanced left and right, not quite able to focus. Apart from the bloodcurdling conversation he was having, everything else seemed normal. A normality that, he knew, would be banished from his life from here on.

He climbed into the car. Even though it was a new, top-of-the-line BMW, it had an odd, unpleasant smell that immediately pricked his nostrils. He couldn't quite place it as the stranger got in behind the wheel and pulled out into the sparse traffic.

Behrouz couldn't contain himself. "What's happened? What do you mean, they might be in danger? What kind of danger?"

The stranger kept his gaze straight. "Actually, it's not just them. It's all three of you."

The even, unflustered way he said it made it sound even more unnerving.

The stranger slid a sideways glance at him. "It has to do with your work. Or more specifically, with something you recently found."

"Something I found?" Behrouz's mind skidded for a beat, then latched onto what the man meant. "The letter?"

The stranger nodded. "You've been trying to understand what it refers to, but so far, without success."

It was a statement, not a question, and said with a firm assurance that made it all the more ominous. The stranger not only knew about it, he seemed to know about the walls Behrouz was hitting in his research.

Behrouz fidgeted with his glasses. "How do you know about that?"

"Please, Professor. I make it my business to know everything about anything that piques my curiosity. And your find has piqued my curiosity. A lot. And in the same way that you're meticulous about your work and your research—admirably so, I must add—I'm just as meticulous about mine. Some might even say fanatical. So, yes, I know about what you've been doing. Where you've been. Who you've spoken to. I know what you've been able to deduce, and what still eludes you. And I know a lot more. Peripheral things. Things like Miss Deborah being your little Farnaz's favorite teacher at school. Like knowing your wife's prepared you some *gheimeh bademjan* for dinner." He paused, then added, "Which is really sweet of her, given that you only asked her for it last night. But then, she *was* in a vulnerable position, wasn't she?"

Behrouz felt the last vestiges of life drain from his face as panic flooded through him. *How can he— He's watching us, listening to us? In our bedroom?* It took him a moment to regain control of his body long enough to eke out a few words.

"What do you want from me?"

"The same thing you want, Professor. I want to find it. The trove that the letter refers to. I want it."

Behrouz's mind was drowning in a sinkhole of unreality. He struggled to sound coherent. "I'm trying to find it, but—it's like you said. I'm having trouble figuring it out."

The stranger turned to face him only briefly, but his hard stare felt like a physical blow. "You have to try harder," he told Behrouz. Facing forward again, he added, "You have to try as if your life depended on it. Which, in this case, it does."

He swerved off the main road and turned into a narrow street that was lined with shuttered storefronts, where he pulled over. Behrouz gave the surroundings a quick scan. There was no one around, and no lights from the buildings above the shops.

The stranger hit the start/stop button to kill the engine and turned to face Behrouz.

"I need you to know that I'm serious about this," he told him, still with

the infuriatingly smooth tone. “I need you to understand that it’s very, very important to me that you do everything possible—*everything*—to complete your work. I need you to fully grasp how crucial it is to your well-being, and to that of your wife and daughter, that you devote all your time and energy to this matter, that you dig deep into any untapped resources inside you and figure this thing out for me. From this point onwards, you should be thinking about nothing else. Nothing.”

He paused to let his words sink in. “At the same time,” he added, “I also need to make sure you understand that acting on any silly fantasies you might have about going to the police for help would be, frankly, catastrophic. It’s vital that you understand this. We could walk into a police station together right now and I guarantee you the only one of us who would suffer any consequences would be you—and they would be, again, catastrophic. I need to convince you of this. I need you to have absolutely no doubt about what I’m prepared to do, what I’m capable of doing, and how far I’m prepared to go, to make sure that you do this for me.”

The stranger palmed the key fob and clicked open his door. “Maybe this will do the trick. Come.”

He climbed out.

Behrouz followed him, exiting the car on wobbly legs. The stranger walked around to the back of the car. Behrouz glanced upward, looking for any sign of life, wild notions of making a run for it and yelling for help swelling and bursting inside him, but he just joined his tormentor, walking listlessly as if he were in a chain gang.

The stranger hit a button on the key fob. The trunk of the car clicked open and hovered upward.

Behrouz didn’t want to look in, but as the stranger reached in, the professor couldn’t rein in his eyes. The trunk was mercifully empty, except for a small travel case. The stranger slid it closer to the edge of the trunk, and as he unzipped it, a putrid smell accosted Behrouz’s nostrils, causing him to gag and falter back a step. The stranger didn’t seem to mind it. He reached into the bag and casually pulled out a mess of hair, skin, and blood that he held up for Behrouz without the merest trace of hesitation or discomfort.

Behrouz felt the contents of his stomach shoot into his throat as he recognized the severed head the stranger was holding up.

Miss Deborah. His daughter’s favorite teacher.

Or what was left of her.

Behrouz lost hold of his body, retching violently as his knees buckled. He collapsed to the ground, gagging and spewing and gasping for air, unable to breathe, one hand clamped across his eyes to block out the horror of it.

The stranger didn't allow him any respite. He bent down to his level, grabbed the professor by the hair and yanked his head up so he couldn't avoid being face-to-face with the hideous, bloody lump.

"Find it," he ordered him. "Find this trove. Do whatever you have to do, but find it. Or you, your wife, your daughter, your parents back in Tehran, your sister and her family . . ."

And he left it at that, comfortably certain that the professor had gotten the message.