

## Chapter 1

Friday, August 22, 2025

**Shielding his eyes** against the relentless August sun, its heat intensifying the humidity that clung to his body, Professor Whitfield meticulously excavates the ancient site behind the Temple Mount in an area believed to be the remains of very old sectarian ruins. In this same location, curiously, the professor had found an upside-down silver crucifix five months ago. His focus, unwavering, despite the cacophony of the city, the distant buzz of commerce, and the melodic call to prayer. Suddenly, a tiny glint in the earth caught his trained eye. With a delicate touch, he started brushing the dirt away. He took numerous photos at each stage of the unearthing. After taking precise measurements and making a few drawings of the object's location, Whitfield, with meticulous precision, proceeded to unearth the rest of the object. It was truly a treasure, an age-old thin copper tablet etched with enigmatic symbols, perhaps a language lost to time.

His pulse quickened as he grasped the relic, an electrifying realization coursing through him. Could this discovery be the linchpin to a web of ancient secrets? Or, could the tablet be a key to unraveling historical mysteries long forgotten? He carefully laid the object on a clean cloth and took more photos, front, back, and at different angles of illumination.

"Ralph, come quickly!" Professor Whitfield's voice echoed across the excavation site his tone urgent.

Dust billowed around Ralph's feet as he hurried through the trenches, his eagerness to reach Professor Whitfield evident in his every step.

"Hey, Dr. Whitfield? What have you found?"

Gesturing to the ancient copper tablet, Whitfield's eyes glimmered with excitement. "I've uncovered an extraordinary artifact, Ralph. Look at these symbols! I've never seen anything like it."

The inscriptions, appearing to be etched with an enigmatic and unfamiliar script, drew his gaze like a magnet. "Professor, this is amazing! It looks almost like hieroglyphics to me. What do you think they mean professor?"

Whitfield smiles, a sense of wonder in his voice. "That's what we're going to find out, Ralph. But first, we need to preserve this relic. Please fetch the preservation box from my tent."

"And be careful, copper tablets are a very rare find. Do not tell anyone else about them, I will so advise the rest of the team at a later time." *The fewer people who knew, the safer the tablets would be.* This need for secrecy was a new sensation for Albert Whitfield. His previous vocation as a Catholic priest had been defined by faith shared openly with his congregation. His faith has always guided his moral duty to save each person he encountered from themselves. He believed that each person frequently sabotages their own progress and well-being. However, a series of personal tragedies and crises of faith led him to question his beliefs and to ultimately leave the Church.

Seeking a new purpose, Whitfield threw himself into his love of history and archaeology. His exceptional knowledge and talent earned him a position as a part-time professor at Columbia University and a spot on a prestigious dig in Jerusalem.

Now in his late thirties, Whitfield has rebuilt his life in New York City. His British roots are still strong, and he visits his family in the UK whenever he can. His girlfriend, a fellow academic, shares his passion for archaeology.

Despite his turbulent past, Whitfield has retained his sharp wit and no-nonsense attitude. His

sarcasm often masks a deep-seated passion for his work, especially as he uncovers ancient mysteries in Jerusalem. The copper tablet, etched with symbols completely foreign to him, felt jarringly out of place amidst the familiar ruins of Jerusalem. Whitfield, barely able to control his excitement thought that whatever language this was, it was undoubtedly ancient." *But why a crucifix portraying Jesus's feet by the top beam?*

Whitfield decided to take an early break. It's 4:35 PM as he proceeds to his hotel to secure the artifact. Amidst the bustling noises and smells of Jerusalem streets, Whitfield felt dizzy and a sudden mild headache promptly ensued. Strange, as he never gets headaches. Attempting to cross the busy street, he almost got hit by a passing Metronit bus.

Professor Whitfield, who is of British-Jewish ancestry, is of average height and weight. His dark brown hair is starting to show a few silver streaks. A strong angular face and a prominent jawline, wrinkled forehead, and penetrating brown eyes reveal his intelligence and curiosity; together with his glasses, a medium-thick mustache, and a slightly hooked nose complete the picture of a well-groomed man who carries himself with confidence and professionalism.

Ralph Alhud has returned home after a short day with Whitfield and wastes no time to take a shower and gets set to enjoy a traditional Shawarma; thinly sliced lamb cooked on a rotating spit and served in pita bread which he bought on the way home. He lives in a very small room which he rents from a local family. He's got everything he needs in his tiny room; a TV, a small fridge, a comfortable twin-sized bed and a small microwave which he recently acquired from a used appliance shop.

He is a single young man in his late twenties, currently attending school at Jerusalem Preparatory Design, Art and Architecture Sto'tz. Ralph hopes to become an Architect one day, but, for now, he is

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content with helping Professor Whitfield with sketching and organizing his dig sites.

As he sat down to eat, he suddenly felt dizzy and nauseous. It's been a while since he felt so sick. After sitting down for a few minutes, he managed to eat.

Shortly after, Ralph excitedly calls his best friend at school and tells him about the new discovery. Outside, sitting in a black sedan, a shadowy figure, a man wearing a fake goatee with dark sunglasses, listens in to Ralph's conversation using a Stingray device.

This man has followed Professor Whitfield and his team on many of his digs since the professor discovered a chalice that purportedly displayed the name of Jesus "Joshua" as he was known back then. It was a media sensation and religious leaders around the world rushed to debunk that such chalice was not from Jesus's times.

"I tell you this tablet is unique, the professor hasn't seen anything like it before in Jerusalem, and the mysterious writings are..." Said Ralph to his classmate on the phone, he was interrupted by another call.

"Hello," said Ralph. "Hey Ralph, take the day off tomorrow, I'll be doing a little research on our findings today." Exclaimed Whitfield.

"Sure thing professor, when do I report back to the dig?" *I really wouldn't mind taking the weekend off.*

"Oh, it's ok, you can report back Monday, take the weekend off, I need some rest too" Explained Whitfield.

*Yes! I can party a little!* Thought Ralph, excited to have some time off. "Hey man, I'll talk to you later, I just got the whole weekend off!" Said Ralph to his classmate. He heard a strange *click* on the phone just before he hung up.

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Back at The Sephardic House Hotel, Whitfield's headache persists. *Why a headache now! I never get headaches!* After taking a couple of aspirin, he immediately sets to hide the artifact in the room safe. But before he put the tablet safely away, he admired how well preserved the writing or symbols were, grey-colored and distinctly visible against the brownish-copper background. *Why cooper?* He thought. The writing looked almost like Coptic writing but with a cuneiform twist to it.

As he finished putting the tablet away, the hotel's phone rang. "Hello?" He said with a tired but excited tone. "Hey Al, it's Jen, did I catch you at a bad time...?" Jennifer, Whitfield's New York City girlfriend. Jennifer Conley is a history student with a minor in Archaeology, which she added after meeting Whitfield in a class two years ago, at Columbia University, where she is currently a senior Ph.D. student.

Jennifer Conley was a woman who embodied both beauty and intellect. Standing at 5 foot 6 inches, she carried herself with a confidence and grace that drew others to her. Her dark brown hair, cascading in soft waves past her shoulders, framed her striking blue eyes that sparkled with curiosity and passion. Her love for yoga kept her physically fit, her toned form is proof of her dedication to maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle. It was through this shared passion that she met Professor Whitfield, her mentor, and, eventually, her boyfriend. Their relationship was built on a mutual respect for the pursuit of knowledge, a bond strengthened by their many adventures uncovering the secrets hidden within the artifacts they studied.

"Oh Hi Jen. No, I'm just a little tired and just got a headache." Whitfield hesitates to reveal anything about his discovery. *You never know who may be listening through the hotel's phone system.*

"Oh really? Did you take something for it?"

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“Yes, I took some aspirin.” *I’m a grown man!*

“Aspirin? You do know that this is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century right?”

“Oh Jen, you know how I am...”

“Old Fashioned? It sounds like I’ve heard that before.”

“Anything new on your dig?” Says Jenifer.

*I wish I could tell her more.* “Not really, just too hot today so I took an early leave from the site. How’s your dissertation going along?” Inquired Whitfield.

“Well, just peachy... I think I’m doing ok with it, we still have ‘till the end of the semester.” Replied Jennifer.

A knock is heard at Whitfield’s door, “Room Service.” Said the server.

“One moment please” Snapped Whitfield.

“Ok Jen, I’ll let you go now, my dinner is here and I’m truly hungry.” They said their goodbyes and Whitfield had a wonderful Mezze; a selection of small dishes, including hummus, baba ghanoush, falafel, tabbouleh, and stuffed grape leaves. After three years in Jerusalem Whitfield learned to love some of those traditional local dishes.

That evening, Professor Whitfield, seeking the familiar rhythm of his after-dinner walk, stepped out of his second-floor room. Strolling through the interior corridor, with room doors shaped with a medieval-style arch. The interior corridors, being a squared structure with a decorative black fence-type barrier, offered views of the well-appointed lobby below.

Leaving the hotel, Whitfield travels North along Derech Hashiloah street and stops to rest at the Beit Shalom Garden, where he sits on a stone bench at the edge of the park bathing in the warm golden light of the setting sun.

While watching the people go by, an unassuming stranger, dressed in a grey sports jacket and

wearing dark sunglasses, sits next to him. *Ok, I hope I'm safe here, there are a lot of people around here.* Thought Whitfield.

“Good evening, such a nice spot to take a rest, isn't it?” Proclaims the stranger.

The shadowy figure, known as "The Collector," was a wealthy and mysterious individual with an insatiable appetite for rare and powerful artifacts. For years, The Collector has been following Professor Whitfield's career, taking great interest in his discoveries. He had learned to employ sophisticated surveillance techniques in effect, spying on prominent archaeologists and Art buyers around the world.

He had tracked Ralph to his home and, using a device that scanned cell phone frequencies, eavesdropped on his conversation with a classmate. Through this, he discovered the existence of an ancient copper tablet adorned with mysterious inscriptions. The Collector quickly realized that this new discovery might be the key to unlocking a greater treasure, perhaps an ancient temple rumored to contain unimaginable power.

*He seems to be nice.* Whitfield replies, “Yes, not bad considering how hot it was earlier today.”

“Yes, so it was.” Says the Collector. “Say, you look familiar...” Says the Collector in a foreign tone to Whitfield. “You are Professor Whitfield, right?” he asks, offering a handshake.

Adnan Sunil, The Collector, exuded an air of sophistication and intrigue. He stood tall and lean, with chiseled features and a round but angular jawline. His dark hair was meticulously styled, and even though baldness was quickly taking over, a hint of grey at the temples lent him a distinguished appearance.

His piercing grey eyes held a keen intelligence and an inscrutable quality that made it difficult to discern his true intentions. His dress was always impeccable, favoring tailored suits in shades of

charcoal and gray that emphasized his commanding presence.

Despite his refined appearance, The Collector possessed a subtle strength that, even at the age of 72, was evident in his firm handshake and confident gait. Born in India, his parents migrated to the U.K. from India when he was a teenager, but he never forgot his land and the love he had for it. A thin, jagged scar ran along his left cheekbone, hinting at a past filled with danger and secrets.

Recently remarried to a British lady, he was the Don Juan of the 1970s. An Italian woman had captured his heart during that time, and they had a son whom he never saw again. Despite his disapproval of the boy's chosen career path, he kept tabs on him throughout his life.

Overall, Adnan Sunil was a man who seemed at home in boardrooms and ancient ruins alike. His enigmatic aura and imposing demeanor made him a force to be reckoned with—a person one could never fully trust, yet whose charm and charisma were difficult to resist.

"I'm sorry to bother you, I couldn't help but recognize you from your lectures. My name is Adnan Sunil." In conversation with The Collector, who expresses admiration for the professor's work, Adnan mentions his interest in ancient artifacts. The Collector continues, "I couldn't help but overhear some rumors about an intriguing discovery you and your team made recently. Something about an ancient tablet with mysterious inscriptions? It sounds utterly fascinating."

*How could he know about that! I asked everyone to keep it quiet.* Trying to contain his surprise, Whitfield sits up straight on the bench and says "Mr..." "Call me Adnan" says the Collector. "Ok Adnan, I don't know where you heard such a thing, I do come up with interesting artifacts almost every day, there is nothing unusual about anything I have found there." Assured Whitfield.

Undeterred, the Collector adopts a calm, persistent approach. He tries to build rapport by expressing his admiration for Whitfield's work and engaging in casual conversation about ancient history and archaeology. Meanwhile, he also drops subtle hints about his vast resources and connections, implying that he could be a valuable asset to Whitfield's work.

"You know, Professor Whitfield, I have a keen interest in funding historical research and archaeology," The Collector says. "I'd be honored to offer my support to your work if there's a way I can contribute."

"Sir, I appreciate your offer, however, at this stage, my team and I are making good progress." Said Whitfield. *I have never been fond of salesmen.*

But, The Collector remains persistent, gently probing for more details about the excavation site and its findings. "I understand your position, professor, but I'm sure you can appreciate that my interest is sincere. I respect your dedication to preserving historical artifacts for future generations, and I'd love to find a way to assist in your efforts."

*My God! He is really insistent!* "Thanks again, Mr.?"

"Adnan Sunil. Here is my card, just in case I can be of any assistance don't hesitate to call me please." Ushers The Collector as he hastily snaps a card out of his grey jacket.

As Whitfield accepts the card, he stands up and excuses himself from The Collector's company. "Thanks, if you excuse me, I have a prior engagement to attend to." Says Whitfield as he starts to head back in the direction of the hotel. He took a quick look back at the Collector but, he had simply disappeared. *I can't believe this! Who leaked the information about the artifact.*"

The Collector, after going around the corner, places a call, "Okay, he seems vulnerable enough, do it tomorrow morning."

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That night, Whitfield had trouble falling asleep as he thought about who could have broken their silence about the artifact. Through the night he tossed back and forth as his mind was infused with a sense of dread and darkness. *He had never felt so threatened.*