

A mysterious hieroglyphic Code is found in Jerusalem. An enigmatic billionaire who heads the black market in antiquities plunders the find. A progressive Egyptologist stands at the center of a predynastic secret that could change the world. Three days of fast-paced suspense.

Code of the King: A Deadly Search for Ancient Wisdom

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CODE OF THE KING

A Deadly Search for Ancient Wisdom

**The Award-Winning
BOOK 1**

Of the New Supernatural Thriller Trilogy

MASTER OF THE EDGE

Jeri Castronova

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Prologue

Jerusalem. Friday, 9:10 PM

A blast of hot air sent him reeling. Instinctively, his eyes closed. The heat entered his nose, burning his lungs. He shielded his face with one hand. With the other he felt the back of his head where a sharp pain began. Where did that staccato whirring come from? Was it the wind, or the anger of the spirit ancestors?

He looked down into the dark cavern that hid its secrets in the mists of hoary time, feeling its web of seduction surround him.

Another searing sting on his right temple drove his head sideways. He felt oozing warmth. Blood. The whirring grew louder. Now he knew. He should not have disturbed their resting place.

The Pool of Siloam beckoned with secrets that lay at the deepest level, beneath the primitive stones. He had searched a lifetime for this moment. An epochal portent of glory that inevitably came with discovery of an ancient site.

He turned to the direction of the attack. In a flash it came at him again and hit square in the forehead. He sank to the ground.

This couldn't be happening. Not to him, the most renowned archeologist of the Herodian era. He tried to call out, but his voice failed. His hand reached out, but no one took it. Bitter bile leapt into his throat, fury spilling out of every pore.

Where were they? Enraged that his constant followers, who basked in his giant shadow over the years, had

JERI CASTRONOVA

vanished, he cursed their desertion and reveled in the perverted notion they would no longer feel the warmth of his sun.

Except one. A livid pang of remorse swept over him as he saw her face one last time.

His consciousness jerked from his body. He rolled uncontrollably toward the gaping maw. Scorching heat greased his way. The long descent into the Cave of the Matriarchs was the last journey he would ever take.

Chapter 1

Santa Barbara, California. Friday, 1:15 PM

“It’s like telling people not to have sex.”

Dr. Sydney Grace, Professor of Egyptology, stood to one side of a large screen showing a color image of a beautiful Mayan relief. Keeping one eye on the notebook monitor perched on the center lectern, she pointed the red laser at specific details on the screen, clicking through various photos of high-quality antiquities. Dim lighting in the huge lecture hall brought the representations up close and personal, mimicking the nearby Cineplex.

Several students in the University of California class who had been surreptitiously text messaging under their desks abruptly sat up. A sure-fire method to get their attention—works every time, she mused.

“Collectors want gorgeous objects. They don’t care if it’s *hot*. They care even less about provenance.”

She clicked on a photo with thousands of holes sunk into a large expanse of earth, the remains of rubble left by looters. The next slide showed a large limestone statue minus the head. In the next image U.S. Customs officers smiled as they opened the serene female head and posed for the cameras.

After all the global trafficking lectures of disappearing antiquities and landscapes pulverized by grave robbers, her blood still bubbled and her fury rose at the contemptible acts of desecration.

“In the Yucatan,” she clicked on a typical rural village, “a teenaged boy actually approached me, lowered his back pack, and took out a small piece of stone. It didn’t take an

JERI CASTRONOVA

archeologist to recognize Mayan glyphs.” She lowered her voice to imitate the seller. “*You want it? There’s a lot more where that came from*”

A girl in the front row snickered at Sydney’s imitation, and then looked around when she realized no one else laughed.

Sydney flashed back to the scariest day she had ever known. A day when a straw hat nearly cost her life.

A member of the university group sent to study an archeological site near Chichen Itza, she asked the boy where he got the stone. He pointed to a run-down shack at the edge of the village. Most of the group was busy at the site, a new area near the cenote, sacred well, where ancient objects had recently been discovered. Returning to the small hotel for her broad-rimmed hat brought her face to face with the boy. When they reached the hut, he kept walking.

“Donde, where?” she asked.

“I show you.”

Wary to go further with a stranger in a strange land, she stopped, turned around. The unpaved village street lay empty except for a donkey munching hay and a dog lying nearby. Her curiosity aroused, she decided to follow him a short distance into the jungle.

“How far?” she asked.

“Close. Come. I found it myself.”

There must be twenty shades of green in here. Only a few steps from the hut, a canopy of lush tropical fronds of all sizes cast speckled shadows across the well-worn path. Dense vegetation seemed to jockey for space and cast out long arms of branches onto the ground, grabbing onto anything they could entwine.

She looked behind at the path and could not see the village. Wanting to go back, yet interested in his find, she

CODE OF THE KING

followed as he turned off the path, moving through ominous strands of unknown flora. Just when the hanging branches from the sky fell like bars in a cage, she felt the jungle surround her with an overbearing atmosphere. He stopped at several holes in the middle of a small clearing strewn with pottery shards, rubble, shovel and pails.

“Found it myself!” he said proudly. “Me, Ricardo!” He reached into a hole and pulled out an intact pot with Mayan glyphs and figures painted in black. Before she could take it from him, they heard voices.

“Quick! Hide!” He bent down, ran through the jungle in the opposite direction from the voices with Sydney close behind. They knelt at a spot with thick undergrowth.

“Looters,” he whispered.

She rose slightly. Three men, armed with assault rifles. Getting closer. “They don’t know we’re here,” she whispered.

This is their territory—it all belongs to them.”

Their voices grew louder as they rushed through the opaque forest.

“I’ve got to get a photo.” Her camera out, flash off, she held it over her head and clicked, then again.

They heard sudden silence. Then angry voices shouting in their direction.

“Run,” Ricardo whispered, as he took off.

Sydney’s hunched position did not lend itself to speed. Ricardo didn’t look back. She heard them running behind her.

Suddenly above, the deafening thump of rotor blades appeared from nowhere. We’re goners, she thought.

Ricardo knelt, looking up.

“Is it a police chopper?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Looter chopper—to pick them up.”

JERI CASTRONOVA

They watched their pursuers turn, running in the direction of the chopper. Two looters stopped, raised their rifles, and sprayed the area, rounds bouncing off a big rock beside Sydney. She dove for the ground, her heart in her throat. Then they turned, disappearing into the jungle.

She clicked on a jungle scene of three armed camouflage-garbed men and briefly told the story of her dangerous encounter with black market thieves.

“Did you get out of there alive, Dr. Grace?” asked a voice, bringing laughter to the room.

The next shot showed a young man next to a dilapidated hut smiling at his Mayan shards.

“Ricardo never found the path we took in, but somehow he found the way out of the jungle.”

She clicked on more devastation. A Mayan limestone monument known as a stela was stripped of its carved front by a chain saw, leaving the rest of the mangled stone in the ground.

“It was too heavy to carry out intact. Maybe my little artifact thief chipped off a piece. No one in our group bought anything from him. I saw to that,” she said vehemently. “But he’d have no problem selling what he found. Tourists snagged anything Ricardo showed them, and then made a profit off dealers in the states, who sell to museums.”

The class sat in silence. “Unfortunately, the Metropolitan in New York, the British Museum, Berlin Museum, Israel Museum, and others, all deal in looted and faked artifacts.”

“In the Yucatan, Belize, and Guatemala, looters are obliterating sites of the Mayan civilization. If it weren’t for the two dozen sites actively excavated by archeologists, *all* the jade, gold, silver, wall carvings, and statues would be

CODE OF THE KING

gone. *More damage has been done by looters in the past twenty-five years than the previous ten centuries.*”

Sydney looked at the rows of students in the lecture hall, which led upward into the dark unknown at the top of the stairs. At this point in her lecture, she usually paused, both to give her students time to assimilate the information, and to allow herself to calm down. This was not one of her favorite topics, but one she felt passionate about. Of the fifty students, most looked stunned into silence.

As she steadied herself on the lectern and nearby chair, she felt a tingle in her knees, climbing up her body, causing...what? The sound of the whirring fan in the laptop filled her ears until it roared into the room. She was aware of an acrid smell emanating from the interior of the computer. This was not her usual calming down technique.

A sudden inner squall began in her heart and forced its way up to the place where words are formed. Forget it, she thought. Concentrate!

The sound of the fan whirred itself back into the soft background until Sydney heard a whisper arise from the formless motion. *“Go to the lake of salt.”*

In a state of shock, she looked at her students. Had they heard the voice? But her students weren't there. Nor was the screen, the computer, or the lectern. The room had vanished! She stood by herself in a lecture hall that seconds before had been filled with students at long tables in dim light watching a screen of antiquities images.

She stood in the center of a bright blue light that filled the room. Somehow the whispered words became her senses, such that her shock merged into awareness of a greater part of her being.

“Find the Code.”

JERI CASTRONOVA

A sense of warmth accompanied the voice—a heady sensation that streamed through her blood like a bubbling rivulet after the first spring rain. The steady thump of her heart reverberated with the words in an inexplicable beat of familiarity. Her eyes searched the light, seeking the source of the voice.

“Who said that?” she managed to mutter.

The room slowly emerged out of the haze. Several students in the front row stared at her, then each other, their expressions as one: the prof has definitely lost it. The students looked up quietly from their laptops.

She touched the lectern with her palm maintaining her balance. A couple of students shifted uneasily in their seats. Sydney took a sip from her water bottle and looked at her notes, reviving her memory. Clearing her throat, she continued, forcing her attention back to the room.

She shifted gears in her lecture, trying to bring her mind back to reality. “The...um, as we’ve just seen,” she clicked the remote to a photo of the desert, “many things are hidden in the sands.” She turned slowly to the screen, suddenly realizing the truth in that statement.

“We now turn to ancient Egypt.” She went to the board. “There were legends, old even to the Egyptians, about the god Thoth.” She wrote his name, underlining the first *h*. “Silent *h*, long *o*. He would appear in person to the pharaoh during annual rituals.” Her heart stopped thumping; she took a deep breath and relaxed. “The statue of the god was said to actually come alive in the temple and guide the king in all matters—military campaigns, agricultural advancements for better crops, harnessing the Nile, construction projects.”

“Was the king just hearing a voice, or did the statue actually stand up and speak?” a deep voice asked from the back of the room.

CODE OF THE KING

She took a drink from her water bottle. “Sounds unbelievable, doesn’t it? The ancient writings say the god stood up and walked with the pharaoh.” She clicked on an image of the god. “No one else was in the temple at the time, so we only have the word of the king. This was one way Thoth disseminated his wisdom—first through the pharaoh, then the priests, then to the people.”

“Maybe it was just a propaganda ploy of the kings,” said a burly youth close to the front of the hall.

Sydney turned back to the board. “If it were, it was an excellent ploy, since this hierarchy lasted for thousands of years. Even the earliest Egyptians searched the sands looking for antiquities they believed to have miraculous powers.” Still confused by the bizarre experience, she was filled with a sense of awe at the overriding sensation that still lingered.

Stick to the lesson, she told herself, as she turned back to the class. “There are other stories from the Middle Kingdom about legendary golden statues that were used by the ancient Egyptians for healing the male-female schism.” She paused. What was it she needed to say?

Her eyes cleared. *They’re looking at me with confused expressions.* Can I blame them? She clicked on a gold coffin from the tomb of Tutankhamun. “Coffins, not one but several, inside the outer sarcophagus. Tomb walls lined with solid gold hieroglyphs. Great quantities of gold were used over thousands of years.”

Uncertain of what just happened, she knew she heard a voice inside her head—very clear—that directed her to go to a lake of salt to find a code. The class seemed unusually quiet.

“Their wealth of gold was attributed to magic given to the Shemsu by Thoth. It was said they could mysteriously transform base metals into gold. But, as sometimes happens,

JERI CASTRONOVA

the power was misused. To ensure it would never again fall into the wrong hands, the priests buried the golden objects somewhere in the desert.”

“Shem who, Dr. Grace?” asked the student in the front row.

Where did that come from? She had no idea what she just said, sat down in the chair by the lectern, and clicked off the laptop. Was she possessed? Sweet Malarkey! Or did a ghost come into the room? She did not believe in supernatural events or anything she could not see, examine, or explain in rational, scientific terms.

She glanced at the student in the front row. His eyes looked other-worldly and seemed to take in more than he would ever admit.

The bell sounded the end of class. She was the first one out the door.

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