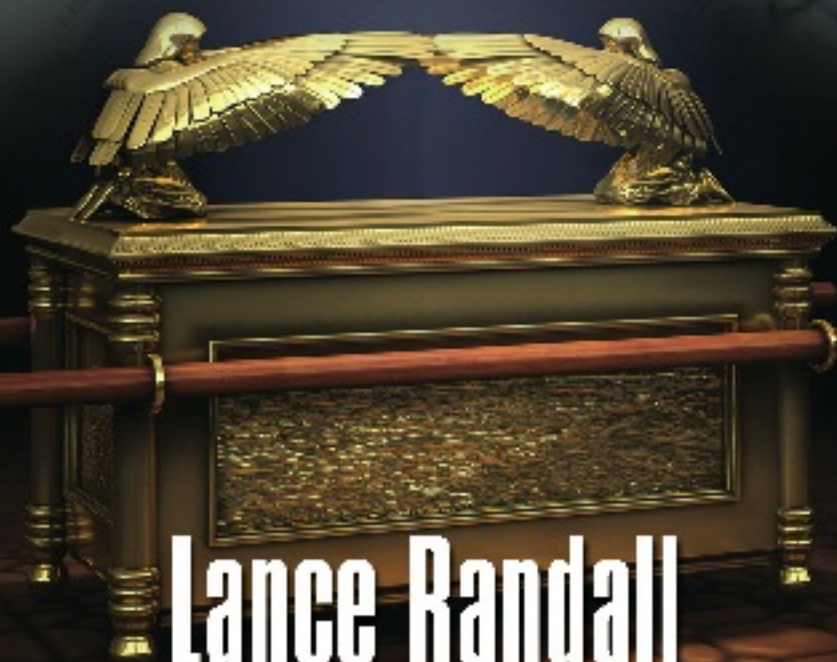


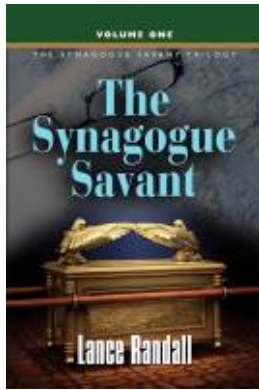
VOLUME ONE

THE SYNAGOGUE SAVANT TRILOGY

The Synagogue Savant



Lance Randall



In 1910, the Zionist movement, resisted by Arabs, driven by Jewish hardliners, and supported by Christians, is growing in influence. Three groups of extremists chase a powerful symbol of Jewish nationalism across the Atlantic and throughout modern day Israel. An aging businessman, an orphaned craftsman, and a beautiful young woman resist the forces struggling over Palestine and find excitement, purpose, and love. The Synagogue Savant raises questions and exposes possibilities that are issues even today.

The Synagogue Savant

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The Synagogue Savant



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First Edition

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Prologue

As the dust settled over the commander's crushed body, the dead man's eyes remained open, reflecting the terror of the last few moments. His lieutenant, Vilna, lay on his side near the lifeless body, his own legs crushed beneath a huge chunk of roof that had collapsed only moments earlier. If Vilna could have reached him, he would have pressed the man's eyelids closed; but he couldn't. Vilna could only watch as the grit and powder filling the air settled down and coagulated on the moist unseeing orbs of his friend and leader. Eventually the muddy film blocked out the hazel color of the man's irises.

The irony that he was alive to witness the death of his friend here in this cavern was not lost on him. As he waited for his own injuries to take their final toll, Vilna relived the search that had taken him halfway around the world for the Zionist cause.

The priceless golden object the men had pursued for months lie safe just beyond his grasp. He longed to touch the gleaming, glittering surface before he died, but any effort to stretch out his arms brought fresh waves of excruciating pain from his pinned legs.

Protected in a little alcove formed from the collapsing rock, the heavy gold box rested as though carefully placed in its niche by gentle hands. The light from one of the discarded electric lanterns pointed directly at it, causing the reflected light to cast a golden glow in the small spaces left from the mayhem of the mountain's collapse.

Vilna faintly heard two men's voices far away. He knew who they were and wondered how they had survived the cavern's collapse. *If they survived, would they ever return for the beautiful creation before him?* he wondered.

His fading eyes remained locked on the sacred article he had worked so hard to capture. As his breathing labored, the battery-powered light faded, leaving only darkness. He closed his eyes, conscious that no one

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remained to press his eyelids shut when the life went out of them. The last sound he heard was laughter.

In the darkness, the men's bodies would decay and turn to dust, but the golden ark would rest unharmed in its hidden nook until it was needed.

Chapter One

The Break-In

The Village of Moreau, Georgia, USA – March 27, 1879

The wagon train consisted of two Conestoga and three Studebaker tall-sided wagons. The Conestogas were made in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and each carried more than two tons of supplies. The Studebaker Brothers' wagons from Indiana, were half that size, but were capable of traveling over rougher terrain than the larger Conestogas. Teams of six oxen pulled the larger wagons and six mules the smaller. The Conestogas' dirty-white arched canvas bonnets protected the boxes and barrels stored inside; flat soiled gray tarpaulins were tied down tightly over the packed goods in the smaller Studebaker wagons'.

A dozen men either rode on the wagons or alongside on horses. The muleteers and bullwhackers driving the teams of animals screamed profanity punctuated by the cracks of their ten-foot long bullwhips. The horsemen's vigilance was focused on the sides of the road, searching for any threat to the group. Every teamster was heavily armed, including the men with shotguns riding on top of the Studebakers.

Times were still difficult in the South. Slow recovery from the Southern Rebellion, which had ended twelve years earlier, combined with the Panic of 1873 continued to drag down the financial markets. The economic recession's effects were felt even in the rural communities, the desperate times driving good people and bad to crime. Wagon trains bringing supplies from the railheads in the South to the smaller rural communities were prime targets for despondent paupers. The outfitters in this particular train were taking no chances.

Moreau was a brief stop, a watering hole for the animals and a few crates for delivery. The small community was supplied by one general store operated by Tobias Strozier and his wife; the crates held the

inventory the farmers in the surrounding countryside would need to make it through the summer. George Morrison, the wagon master, carried the manifests.

"Are you Strozier?" the grizzled old teamster asked the young man who approached the lead wagon after the train had ground to a halt in the dusty street.

"Yes, Tobias Strozier, at your service, sir," the young merchant responded over the screams of the crying baby clinging to the hip of the young woman standing under the porch of the store.

"I've got two crates for you. Sign the invoice," he growled handing down several sheets of wrinkled paper. "Two crates marked Strozier, wagon three," he shouted at two hardscrabble teamsters leaning against the back wheel, sending them scrambling to offload the boxes.

When the transfer of the cargo was complete and the animals watered, the screaming, cursing drovers whacked and cracked the animals into motion, the creaking, grinding wheels and axles turning slowly forward. Strozier could hear the men and beasts in their battle with inertia long after they were out of sight, but he was absorbed in opening one of the boxes. Hidden away in the back room of the store where the laborers had carried his merchandise, he searched for a hammer and then pried open the first large crate. Inside resting on the top of bolts of cloth, sacks of seed and other goods was a smaller wooden box. Its shape was rectangular--approximately one foot long, six inches high, and six inches deep, but the small package weighed nearly thirty pounds. Setting it on top of the other crate, he pried the lid off, pushed the straw packing aside, and pulled out a gold bar.

The gleaming bar held his complete attention for a moment. He was amazed it had come so far without being discovered. Then nervously looking around the room to confirm again he was alone, he took the bar and hid it in the wall behind a loose board.

I won't rest easy until that's delivered, he thought to himself and jumped when he heard the bell on the front door jangle warning of someone's entrance into the small store.

The man waiting for the shopkeeper was dressed in black; the dark color accentuated his emaciated thinness. Horn-rimmed glasses balanced precipitously on his broad nose. A wispy, dark beard speckled with

individual grey hairs strayed down the front of his ink-colored suit. He held a black, round top hat in his hand, crushing the brim with his long fingers.

"Boker Tov, Tobias. Ma shlom-keba?" the man said. His Hebrew greeting was cordial, and his question sincere.

"Good morning, Rabbi. I'm fine," the shopkeeper responded and then motioned for the man to come close to him. He whispered, "Our package has arrived. I'll feel better once it is in your hands,"

"Hatuxal le'harot lee?"

"Yes, I've hidden it in the back. Wait just a minute," Tobias said and walked to the front to lock the door. Returning, they went together to the rear of the shop and he retrieved the bar from its hiding place.

"This represents five years of sacrificial giving from our people in the homeland," the rabbi said. "When I left to come to this country, my brother promised that he would do everything he could to support my work. He has collected all this gold, small bits at a time, so that our project can proceed, just as the people gave small bits to Moses so that he could supply Bezalel with what he needed to fulfill Jehovah's command."

"Tis indeed a great sacrifice since poor Russians don't have Egyptian masters to steal from," Tobias remarked, shrugging away his poor joke when the Rabbi looked up at him. "I never thought it would make it here," he continued.

"Yes, it had to pass through many hands to find its way. God has blessed our work by allowing its safe passage," the scholarly Jewish clergyman responded. "Thank you for your part in this conspiracy."

"Rabbi, we have a larger problem. The workshop in the barn is not going to be a safe place to continue our work with such a valuable piece of material."

"Yes, I have been thinking about that. Certainly, the little cabin we use for a meeting place is not adequate, and neither is the barn where my tools lay. It will be sometime before we begin to apply the gold to the frame we have formed. In the meantime, God will provide a place of haven."

Periodically, shipments arrived from the rabbi's brother through the emporium's merchandise orders. Before the gold was to arrive, the storeowner always received a letter from his merchandise broker, Joseph

Bernard in New York, soliciting a contribution to the Jewish Homeland Fund. Each time, Tobias notified the rabbi of the request and the cleric provided him with a \$10 bank draft to send in with his next order. The gold was always buried in the next shipment. Tobias never knew what happened to it after he turned it over to the priest.

The rabbi continued to share the results of his study with Tobias, however. An intellectual mind honed from continuous study of the Torah since well before his Bar Mitzvah, Tobias loved the conversations and tutelage of the Russian educator. His business grew with the community; as his profit increased, so did the expenditures he made for the books and manuscripts the rabbi requested. When the old store burned in 1889 and Rabbi Ziegler suggested building a new synagogue and library on the old site, the merchant enthusiastically supported the idea, happy that the books and materials would finally have a worthy home.

Tobias's son, Charles Strozier, the young brat on his mother's hip in 1879, was as much a part of the store as the father. As the pages of the calendar turned and the years passed, his role progressed. As a toddler, he played on the floor by the potbellied stove. As a youth, he swept the floors and dusted the shelves. As a young man, he acted as salesman and performed clerical duties, but the father didn't share everything with the son.

The school of experience prepared Charles well. In the autumn of 1898, his father died and he had to take over the store. The old Rabbi died in January of the following year.

The next spring the young shop owner received a request from the Jewish Homeland Fund for a donation. Charles tossed it in the trash. There were no more gold shipments.

* * * *

New York, New York, USA – March 4, 1899

Joseph Bernard looked like he was sixty-five, but he was not a day older than fifty-five. In fact he was exactly fifty-five. Today was his birthday. Servants hustled about the spacious penthouse completing one

task after another in preparation for the luncheon party his wife had so elaborately planned.

"Garton, has my brother come in?" he asked the immaculately dressed butler.

"No sir."

"Please escort him to my office and find me as soon as he arrives," Bernard said and returned his attention to his work.

He shuffled the papers in front of him that confirmed the deaths of Rabbi Pyotr Ziegler and Tobias Strozier. Several months had passed since he sent the letter requesting a donation to the Jewish Homeland Fund. There had been no response, suggesting the two men had died; however, verifying the demise of his patrons had not been easy. The rural environment surrounding Moreau, Georgia did not support a newspaper that printed obituaries, and the death certificates issued by local doctors could be months reaching Atlanta, and even longer being recorded in the Georgia Public Records. A request for information by telegraph might arouse suspicion, he decided, and the new technology of the telephone was unavailable since its development was confined to the major metropolitan areas. Joseph concluded the fastest way to find out detailed information was to send a representative under the ruse of demonstrating the new products his company, Bernard Wholesale Brokerage, was offering. No one from his sales staff had ever called on the Strozier Emporium before. Tobias always ordered from the catalog or made a request in writing for some specific piece of farm equipment.

Joseph had sent his brother Isaac on the errand. Though only five years younger, his sibling was something of a roustabout representing the company all over the world, buying goods, arranging for their shipment, even accompanying the more valuable products as they crossed oceans and deserts to arrive in New York. Joseph made the statement more than once: "I could retire on what we spend for steamship tickets and travel expenses for my brother." The fact was, however, Isaac's travels enabled the brothers to support not only their business, but also a growing movement for the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Isaac's contacts in Eastern Europe were extensive. He met Charney Baruck in 1875. Despite their political disagreements, the two men respected each other and communicated with each other frequently.

Baruck had grand ideas for a Russian Jewish party, one that would free the worker from the grip of the aristocracy. In his ideal world there would be a Jewish state recognized within Russia. In 1899, the czar was not about to cooperate and was in fact persecuting Jews with police harassment throughout the country.

It was through Charney that Isaac met a young rabbi in 1875 from a small Eastern Russian village. Mapk Ziegler, pronounced 'Mark' in Russian, was the younger brother of Pyotr, or Peter in English, a Jewish intellectual who had immigrated to the United States after losing his children in a fire caused by the czarist provocateurs. Mark and Isaac became more than friends, they became part of the growing Zionist movement. They never shared their movements with Charney; however, since his politics, though in support of his fellow Jews, were decidedly anti-Zionist. Eventually becoming a member of The Bund, a Jewish Socialist party movement formed in October 1897, Charney considered relocation to Israel as a form of escapism.

The Eastern European community that Pyotr Ziegler led in his brother's absence gave sacrificially, raising large amounts of gold to support Jewish causes. The Russian employers and customers of Ziegler's Jewish friends, however, made some of the sacrifice too. Small amounts of their gold jewelry and coins were offered as "donations" on a regular basis. Periodically, portions of the collections were sent to America to support Rabbi Ziegler's research. Through Isaac and Joseph's planning and coordination, the shipments made their way through New York and into Tobias Strozier's deliveries.

In the late afternoon, Joseph was being shaved when the butler came to announce his brother's arrival. The elder Bernard was looking forward to a second party at Georgina Schuyler's mansion later that evening. Isaac, however, would never go with him.

"Tell 'em I'll be with him in a few minutes. Oh, and give him a small glass of elderberry wine," he instructed the servant.

"He likes sweet wine," he said to the barber, shrugging his shoulders and wrinkling the corner of his mouth mockingly. The two men were opposites in tastes and personal grooming, a fact that caused him some embarrassment when his brother was home from his travels. "You've

missed some wild hairs on my sideburns,” he pointed out as he watched in the mirror the barber’s straight razor scrape his cheek.

Isaac Bernard sprawled on the sedan in his brother’s office. His black hair was disheveled, his suit wrinkled and bunched where the folds of his waist met the rest of his body. The sweet wine was good, but not as good as the muscadine wine Charles Strozier had offered him. He had even offered to market the alcoholic nectar, if the storekeeper could produce enough bottles.

“Welcome home, brother,” the scent of Joseph’s aftershave entered the room before his voice. “What did’ja find out?” he asked, getting right to the point. He leaned against a sprawling desk and waited for his brother to begin.

“Your suspicions were correct. The rabbi and the storeowner died about two and half months apart,” Isaac reported.

“Any indication of where the gold we have been shipping him is?”

“Well, they built a beautiful library and synagogue. I suspect it’s in there somewhere, but there was no way I could go digging around. If I had, the new rabbi and Strozier’s son would have started asking questions.” The glass was empty; he pointed to it and at the same time offered two sheets of paper to his brother.

Joseph leaned forward, took the papers, and perused them as he walked over to the dry sink and grabbed a decanter by the neck. Before he poured the dark liquid into the small glass Isaac held out, he asked, “Where did you get these?”

“Let’s just say that the security at the Moreau Emporium lacks a certain level of . . . well, security,” he grinned.

“Do you know what this is?”

“Yes, it’s a list of the shipments we made by date and weight.”

“And you say this was in the records of the store.”

“Yes, now are you going to pour that or not? Aw, just give me the bottle,” Isaac said, waving his glass. Joseph poured and returned the crystal decanter to the dry sink while staring at the paper. There was only a list of dates and the weight in ounces for each shipment; however, the document did not mention the contents of each delivery.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. This could be a list of anything,” he said unconvincingly. Both men were silent for a few moments. Isaac enjoyed his wine.

“What are you going to do?” Isaac finally asked, trying to imagine his brother on a gold search.

“Nothing . . . we’ll do nothing. It was not our gold. If Jehovah wants to use the rabbi’s work, he will find a way,” he rationalized. He looked at the paper again and laid it on the desk. Turning he looked at his brother, nodded in confirmation, and walked out the door to finish dressing for Georgina’s party.

“Maybe so, but someday we’ll be chasing it,” Isaac said to himself. “Oh, by the way, happy birthday,” he called out after his retreating sibling.

* * * *

Moreau, Georgia, USA – April 12, 1910

Rabbi Zorn waited impatiently. Over the last eight years, Wilbur Coxwell, the synagogue’s night watchman and janitor, had never been late. Six nights a week he arrived at sundown to be locked in by the rabbi, and departed when he was relieved at sunrise. The only break in this routine was the evening after the Sabbath; on Saturday nights, the rabbi’s cousin was responsible for the building’s security. It had never occurred to the rabbi to ask where the janitor lived or what he did with his daylight hours; only the nights concerned him. Tonight, as usual, he held his pocket watch in one hand and with the other the door’s key poised in the lock. He listened for Wilbur’s hollow footsteps, anticipating the scuffs and thuds on the wooden sidewalk that would allow him to go home to his wife and dinner.

The hard clay streets of Moreau, Georgia alternated between choking dust and slick red mud depending on the season. Brick streets had been discussed by the city council, but the idea had been discarded as too expensive for the poor community. In a rush of civic pride, however, wooden sidewalks were installed. Cleaner boots and ladies’ dresses meant more commercial traffic and an ever-increasing number of shops on the main street, though at this late hour only a few shops were open. Most of

the proprietors had already locked up leaving the small town's streets quiet.

The creaking boards and reverberating footfalls announced Wilbur's arrival even before he rounded the corner. In a Pavlovian response, the eager rabbi tightened his grip on the key in the lock. Wilbur greeted his employer with a nod, stepped inside the open door, and watched through the storefront glass as the Jewish leader turned the key and headed home. No words were exchanged between the bearded priest and the wiry-built young man.

Wilbur Coxwell was the son of an itinerant Baptist minister. At age fifteen, the young man found himself fatherless and motherless, his parents both dead from cholera. Sheriff Norton, his father's friend and the only law in Barrett County, had tried to find a home for the boy, finally convincing an unlikely choice to replace the homeless boy's Protestant parents - an old rabbi and his wife.

A Russian immigrant, Rabbi Ziegler, was the Moreau Synagogue's original leader. The couple lost their children before relocating to America in a fire sparked during the racial violence raging through Eastern Europe. Shortly after the tragedy, he and his despondent wife, now beyond their childbearing years, immigrated to Georgia from Europe in 1874 with four other families. The group formed their own enclave and established their synagogue in a small log cabin just outside town. It was unanimous within the Jewish community to appoint the dysphoric rabbi who traveled with them as their spiritual leader. Through the years, word spread of the group's success, and others from the old world had made the journey, creating a Jewish society in an unlikely corner of Georgia. The temple services soon outgrew the cabin and the group had been forced to move to new quarters.

The town's sheriff knew Ziegler's sad story and of his loneliness without family. It was a good match. The rabbi compassionately allowed the new orphan to use the old synagogue meeting place, now just a vacated cabin, as shelter; and he shared the meager food his wife cooked, mostly the mush and soups of an old man's diet. In exchange, the youth spent his days with the old rabbi finishing the construction of the new synagogue facilities, which had been serendipitously provided to replace the original cabin worship place.

Two years prior to Ziegler taking Wilbur under his wing, the town's emporium had caught fire. Located in the heart of the small town, the blaze threatened to destroy the buildings around it and with them the very character of the community, but an alert citizen sounded the alarm and an organized volunteer mob doused the flames before the fire escaped the interior of the merchandise store. Gutted, the shell sat empty until the old rabbi approached the property's owner, Tobias Strozier, about using it as a new synagogue. Toby was a member of the congregation. After the fire, he moved his general merchandise store down the street, taking the opportunity to expand with the growing population of the town. At Ziegler's prodding, he not only provided the building and land for the assembly, but he also generously gave cash to assist with the initial repairs and restoration. As if a gift from God, the new orphan provided much needed labor for the remaining interior finish work, and to the old rabbi's delight, carpentry came naturally to Wilbur. Over the next few years, the inside of the old emporium took on a rich elegant appearance as the young orphan developed his skills under the tutelage of Barrett County's finest craftsmen.

When the temple's meeting hall was completed, Rabbi Ziegler continued to cultivate the young boy's unique gift. He honed it and he used it, expanding the temple and adding the library. The old cleric and young man became inseparable; the two were always absorbed in books when they were not working in sawdust. They talked excitedly with the temple leaders about the plans for building improvements and new discoveries from the tomes pouring into the burgeoning library.

The old man had sworn Wilbur to secrecy about one project, however, and he had drilled the need for security into the young man night after night as they labored side by side in their hidden workshop. When Rabbi Ziegler died in 1899, young Rabbi Zorn took over. Wilbur furtively carried on the work he and the old rabbi had started. Lonely and frightened, he had sustained his mentor's dream, moving toward its completion though afraid to share the success of the project even with the new rabbi.

Wilbur tested the lock to confirm that Rabbi Zorn had correctly secured the synagogue's entry, and turned to begin his rounds, walking through the building checking the doors and possessions of the Beth-el

Temple and Library. Surprisingly, the congregation still numbered less than twenty-five families. If widows weren't counted as a family unit, it was less. This Jewish enclave was the result of the small brave Eastern Russian contingent that immigrated under the leadership of the old rabbi.

The group, however, was prospering through the generosity of several of the members, chief among them Charles Strozier, the son of the group's first benefactor and original owner of the town's merchandise store. It was Charles's father, Tobias, and Rabbi Ziegler who started the library after the completion of the synagogue building, but it was Charles and Rabbi Zorn who brought it to its level of prominence. The rows and stacks of books grew rapidly under the two elder's tutelage, making small town Moreau, Georgia an unlikely place for a world-class library. In recent years the second generation Strozier and the youthful Rabbi Zorn led Beth-el Temple to become a research facility for Jews and Gentiles alike, drawing scholars from far distances and financial grants from government and philanthropic sources. It was this success, both literary and celebrity, along with the growing value of the collection, which insured Wilbur's job.

Now nearly thirty-five years old, Wilbur still enjoyed being the security guard for the temple, but the books meant more to him than anyone knew. Without them, he could not complete the project he and the late Rabbi Ziegler had started.

It was dark outside when Wilbur's inspection of the building and its contents was complete. Backtracking, he walked through the rows of books and found a particularly dusty case. Covertly, he tapped the base of the tower of shelves twice with his toe. Within moments the case slid along the floor revealing a hidden set of stairs. Quickly Wilbur descended and the tower of books retook its place leaving the library quiet and empty.

Outside, the shadows of six men moved across the sidewalk. If discovered by a local resident, their panther-like movement would have aroused immediate suspicion, but they confined themselves to the darkest alcoves, where their dark clothes and foreign features remained hidden.

Down the street, a beautiful young woman swept out of the emporium. She nodded sweetly to the man holding the door and boldly headed to the Widow Martin's boardinghouse under the sputtering gas

street lanterns. She was the last to leave the store. Only the proprietor Charles Strozier remained and he was locking the door behind her.

The six shadows on the sidewalk outside The Beth-el Temple and Library merged into the darkness of an alley opening as she approached. They had never been in this part of the world before and were unaware that the alley was a convenient shortcut between the main street and the residential boulevard behind. The girl could have easily discovered them if she had taken the darker yet shorter way to her lodging. What she did next, however, commanded their complete attention. She stopped at the door of the library, took out a key, furtively glanced around, and entered the library quickly and quietly. She moved so surreptitiously it was as if she had vanished, surprising the men watching in the darkness. In the deepening shadows of the evening, they waited uncomfortably, resting on their aching haunches in the passage between the buildings, observing only the occasional chugging car and almost no one on horseback.

They didn't know who she was, but the young woman was Sarah Baxley, the twenty-eight-year-old daughter of a Pentecostal preacher. "Preacher's Kid" - that was how she thought of herself until she was sixteen. In that year of awakening, she realized that she just might be something more. A late bloomer, her body blossomed very nicely as a teenager, something that every young man in the two-room schoolhouse could attest, but it was not physical appearance that changed her perception of herself. Knowledge became the power within her. While suitors were scorned, Sarah pursued her education relentlessly, studying all the classical subjects. Her father continued to push her to study the Bible and she had. It was why she was prepared when she met her "Bezalel." At least that's what she called him when they were alone together.

Sarah had resisted her parent's efforts to find her a suitable mate. Their plans were always to marry her into a life imitating theirs. Numerous theology students from the seminary in nearby Madison County had been invited to practice their preaching in Reverend Baxley's church and to share a Sunday fried chicken dinner around the Baxley table. The elder preacher was certain that one of the Bible-thumping wannabes would be "the one" called to provide a life for his daughter. Sarah was patient and honored her parents, enduring the meals, but

politely declining any advances from the young men wanting a deeper relationship with her.

She was also methodically and secretively polling the post-secondary educational options open to women at the turn of the new century. She did not want to be a teacher, yet teacher colleges offered her the most opportunities. Finishing schools merely trained women to conduct themselves according to current social mores and customs. In the 1870s, Smith College and Radcliffe College had been formed for women, but even these were still largely institutions to train women for their place in society. That did not seem germane to her.

At age 18, however, Sarah read a sonnet that changed her life:

The New Colossus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Emma Lazarus, 1883

The poem was written by Emma Lazarus, a thirty-four-year-old Jewish activist and poet. She had given it to the organization raising money for the construction of a foundation upon which to place a statue donated by the people of France, honoring America's contribution to the French Revolution. The artwork was a symbol of how freedom should be

won and of how it should be exercised. The statue was named *la Liberté éclairant le monde*. Or if you prefer in English: *Liberty Enlightening the World*. Placed in New York's harbor, it would later become known as the "Statue of Liberty." A friend of the poetess, a New York socialite, Georgina Schuyler, immortalized the poem in 1903 by donating the brass plaque and paying to have it placed within the monument's foundation. She made sure the memorial contained the words of Emma's "New Colossus."

That same year Sarah turned twenty-one, and liberty became more than an abstract concept, it became her quest. In the three years since graduating from the meager education of the Moreau two-room school, Sarah had spent her time in only two ways, much to the chagrin of her parents -- studying the books of the Beth-el Library and working at the Strozier Mercantile. Charles Strozier was a good merchandiser. He learned that from his father, but his true gift was recognizing talent. He saw it in the young carpenter who worked as both watchman and craftsman at the Temple, and he saw it in Sarah. At the risk of angering his older male employees, he promoted Sarah through levels of increasing responsibility. When he approached her about accompanying him and his wife to New York on their annual buying trip, she had jumped at the chance. The junket was a confluence of her growing desire for freedom and her lust for knowledge. Providence had different plans for her. The "two-week" buying trip to the Big Apple would last much longer for Sarah. Through the years she would see her former employer and his wife occasionally as they visited New York's Fashion Show, but until tonight, she had not trod the dusty streets of the small Georgia town for over seven years. It had also been seven years since she had last used the key to the synagogue's library door. During that time, she had grown from being a young Southern belle into a sophisticated young woman. As she slipped into his building, she wondered which he would prefer.

* * * *

Moreau, Georgia, USA – July 4, 1900

Wilbur worked nights. Saturday night he was off though; that meant he had from Saturday morning, when Rabbi Zorn relieved him, until

Sunday night. Tonight was his, and with a big smile, long steps, and light heart he was headed to town. The walk from the old cabin to the heart of Moreau wasn't long, a short mile maybe, but it sometimes took him much longer. He had to pass the Pentecostal church and that was a frequent distraction. Well, not the church, really, but the parsonage next door, and not really the house, but the young woman who lived there. Wilbur had a crush. She was so pretty, young, and obviously smart. She often sat in a rocker on the porch reading or studying with books spread out under the pecan trees on one of the picnic tables used most often for "dinner on the grounds" meetings. Wilbur didn't mean to be a voyeur, but his years with the old man and his elderly wife combined with the solitude of his nights working alone in the synagogue had resulted in stunting any social skills with the opposite sex. He just didn't know how to come out of the bushes and talk with her, and so he admired her through the blossoms and leaves.

The short walk to town today was different though. It was a holiday and he hoped, had even dreamed that he would have the opportunity to meet the young girl at the town fair. Everyone would be there -- ladies with their finest bakery goods on display for the judges, the men with string ties and shined boots swapping lies, fireworks, even a dance, but he doubted the daughter of a Pentecostal preacher would be allowed to participate. He just felt that tonight was the night he would finally meet the girl he had admired so often from behind the wisteria vine.

Though his father and mother had been dead for many years now, Wilbur was a preachers' kid, too. He could remember the Sundays of hard pews, fluttering fans provided by Carson's Funeral Home, stern looks from the disapproving deacons when he whispered to his friend Billy, and the singing. Above all else, he remembered the straining off-key voices of his father's congregations singing all the "blood songs." That's what his daddy used to call the Pentecostal hymns that referenced Jesus's shed blood. Time had erased most of the lyrics he had memorized as a child; the melody was there, but only small phrases remained. There was one song he remembered, though. It was as if he could still hear his mother singing:

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*Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing pow'r?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you washed in the blood,
In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?
Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

The sun was low in the sky; the earth began to cool from the blistering heat of the mid-summer day. As he walked along the dusty road to town, he suddenly heard the hymn. At first he thought it was his mother's voice, but consciously he knew that she had passed away long ago. He listened to this new voice singing the old familiar tune. He could hear the young woman's sweet soprano drawling the first line of the refrain, "Are you waaaaashed . . . in the blood." He stepped off the road and peered through the vine-covered fence; there she sat in the rocking chair, her sewing spread out on her knee. It looked like a fancy dress, probably what she planned to wear to the festival that evening. Her focus was on the needle and thread; his was on her heartfelt song. He didn't mean for this to be a dime novel moment, but he couldn't stay hidden behind the wisteria forever. He stepped through the arbor of lavender flowered vine and pushed the gate open as she finished the refrain and inhaled to begin the second verse.

His voice joined hers:

"Are you walking daily by the Savior's side?"

Her harmony wavered, the soprano notes waning, startled by his appearance on the short brick walkway leading to the picket railed porch. His baritone voice continued, the notes strong and deep, belying the knots in his stomach:

"Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

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Her voice trailed off. She recognized the young man. She didn't know his name, but she knew who he was. And she knew he watched her. Despite her disinterest in meeting young men, her interest was piqued.

He sang alone now.

*"Do you rest each moment in the Crucified?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"*

The refrain followed, she joined in, and they sang together, but neither heard the words. Their focus was on each other -- so intense they would not have heard the voices of angels. The song ended. And there was silence.

Finally he got up the nerve, "Are you going to the festival tonight?"

"Yes."

"Would you go with me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is that the dress you're going to wear?"

"Yes."

"Are you done sewin' it?"

"Yes."

He laughed. If the questions continued, he was pretty sure they were still going to be one-syllable answers. Her mind was muddled, her many thoughts racing, her hormones raging. Finally, it dawned on her where he was trying to lead her.

"Would you like to go with me?" he courageously asked in a quiet voice.

"Oh, give me five minutes. I need to change." She gathered the material of the skirt and rushed off the porch, the screen door slamming behind her.

Running into her bedroom she looked in the mirror instinctively. It was going to take more than five minutes. Other than the rosy glow caused from the flush of emotion, she was a wreck, she thought. Nearly an hour later she squinted through the screen door into the near darkness on the porch unsure whether the young man would still be there or not.

"You missed a beautiful sunset." Wilbur rocked back gently and stood as she pushed the screen door open. In his mind, the colors and majesty

of the sunset paled in comparison to the loveliness of the beautiful young woman. The vision of her was etched into his memory and he would recall the moment often. The next three years gave him the opportunity to stockpile many mental photographic moments though.

Sarah remembered that night also. It was the beginning of her two love affairs, one with Wilbur and the other with his library. That evening at the festival with the young man caused a thirst she had never known. She wanted to see him and be with him, but another insatiable thirst was to follow, the thirst for knowledge. He introduced her to the library, and both new appetites expanded exponentially.

The evening of the festival had been a blur of new experiences for Sarah. The close intimate conversations with a member of the opposite sex, the warmth of his contact as they sat side by side in the Ferris wheel, the chorus of “ooohs and ahhs” they giggled over with each flash of the fireworks, the thrill of his embrace as he held her hand on the walk home. Each moment in the evening created its own desire for more. Her only regret was the stuffed bear he had won for her at the shooting gallery. She loved the bear and kept it on her pillow, but she had held it tight in front of her as he said his “good nights.” She was quite sure he would have kissed her if she had put the bear down. This small regret was more than made up for by his invitation to come for a private tour of the library.

Bubba Bear, the name they had playfully given to the festival souvenir, had been a blessing in disguise. Her father had been watching at the window, anxious for the return of his daughter and not at all happy that she had left without saying goodbye earlier in the evening. A kiss would have exacerbated his already deteriorating mood, the status of which was already low when he saw the young synagogue watchman and his child together. He knew the young man’s parents had been in God’s service, but since falling under the influence of the old rabbi, he was quite sure the young man was a backslider of the first order.

When Sarah came inside, the ensuing conversation between father and daughter began gently. “Did you have a good evening,” was his restrained inquiry, but both his tone and demeanor accelerated the argument. The confrontation ended with him emotionally forbidding her to see the young watchman again, and her running to her bedroom in tears.

“Papa says I’m not supposed to see you anymore,” she told the clean-shaven young man with freshly shined shoes standing at her front porch steps the next afternoon. Others would have thought his polished and carefully groomed appearance was in preparation for the Sunday evening services at her father’s church next door, but she knew he was on his way to his library watchman’s job, and the extra attention to his mien was for her.

“Well at least you can say hello before giving me that news,” he protested. “It ain’t even been twenty-four hours since I stood right here in this spot and you looked like you couldn’t wait to see me again.”

“I do want to see you again, but my father’s forbidden it,” she said speaking bravely, but Wilbur felt the frustration in her voice. Right now, she was not afraid to express her exasperation aloud; her dad had already gone over to the church to prepare for the evening services. Were he home, she would have whispered, for fear of stirring his anger again.

“Well, I want to talk with him, then; is he home?”

He was going to fight for her! That romantic revelation rushed over her.

He started up the steps.

“Wait . . . no . . . he’s not home right now . . . he’s at the church,” she stammered, her face flushed, excited that he would joust for her, torn that any confrontation might mean losing him.

He removed his foot from the first step, pivoted, and began to cross the parsonage yard toward the sanctuary.

“Wilbur, stop,” she called.

He did. He turned toward her. There were tears in her eyes.

“Now is not the time,” her words were soft and full of appreciation and affection.

Retracing his steps, he reached up for her hand. She extended her fingers, but held onto the porch post, afraid that he would draw her away without effort. “I promised you a tour of the library. Find a time and come,” his fingers seductively caressed hers, his voice temptingly called her to action. It wasn’t an action to be taken lightly. It would mean disobeying her father.

“I will,” she committed.

He stepped back releasing her fingers at the last moment before affecting her balance; then wound his way through the shadows of the wisteria to the road that led to town.

She watched him go, the few hours of joy with him in tenuous balance with the lifetime of Sunday school lessons and parental admonishments to “honor your mother and father.”

“If I go, it will be the first time I have deliberately broken one of the Ten Commandments,” she whispered.

But she did.

The next afternoon, Sarah told her father she was going to town to apply for a job at the Mercantile. As promised she went directly to Mr. Strozier’s store and filled out the form the Assistant Manager gave her. Her conscience assuaged, the next stop was the library, her timing perfect. She watched the young rabbi lock Wilbur in and then hurry away toward his home. Quickly she stepped across the street and up onto the wooden sidewalk and tapped on the door. She could see the young man’s back not far from the glass.

Wilbur frequently had pleas from scholars to allow access for after hour’s research. Rabbi Zorn forbade it. “Since you won’t have a key, you’ll have the perfect response,” counseled the rabbi. “Now you don’t have to deny them entry, just tell them you don’t have a way to let them in.” Confiscating Wilbur’s key had been the young cleric’s way to exercise his control after Rabbi Ziegler’s death. Wilbur had surrendered the key without reservation. Why wouldn’t he? He had a whole box of them in the hidden shop. He and the old rabbi had made them together for the contractors during the original construction. Nevertheless, he had honored Rabbi Zorn’s request. He simply ignored the tentative taps on the glass, the whining pleas, and the shouts of the determined. Today was no different. He ignored the pecks on the door.

“Wilbur,” she whispered through the crack in the door.

The echoes of his footfalls in the cavernous, high-ceiling room stopped immediately as he froze in place. His name, whispered, by the only voice in the world he truly wanted to hear. *It must be a dream*, he thought. He turned.

The next few minutes were truly awkward. Sarah was standing on the sidewalk, trying not to look conspicuous or give her intentions of a tryst

with the watchman away. Wilbur, flustered, excited, and for once in his life disorganized, dashed to the door, babbled about the key, and in a flash was gone. Minutes passed and just as Sarah was considering melting away into the streetscape in hopes that no one would report her loitering to her father, when the young man finally appeared grinning behind the glass, dangling the key as a trophy. His infectious smile made her laugh, but finally with one more giggle, she had to point to the lock to awaken him to the further possibilities the key held.

Before the door was beyond half open, the young slender woman slipped into the safety of the library. Wilbur even in his excitement remembered his duties and locked the door behind her. Taking her arm, he escorted her away from the glass portal and into the quiet, secluded research chamber. Overhead a golden luminescence bathed the dome. The setting sun's rays refracted through high-set stained glass windows, the light danced through the intricately carved cornices, and the shining-gilded gleams filtered through the airborne particles that would soon settle on the volumes of books neatly stacked on the rows of shelves below. It was cool inside; a stark contrast to the dusty, hot, muggy, July conditions Sarah had been exposed to on the sidewalk. In the glittering lumens of the library, her moist skin seemed to absorb the golden rays and glow. Wilbur could not take his eyes off of her.

The couple stood facing each other in the quiet. Neither spoke, neither moved, their breath was the only sound in the room. Finally Sarah, remembering the stuffed bear, set her job application copies on the research table beside her, emptying her hands. With no impediments, Wilbur inched closer and took her in his arms. It was a kiss, just a kiss, but neither the young woman nor the young man would ever be the same; both understood the significance of the moment. Each reluctantly stepped back slightly, the separation painful to them.

During the next hour, the young couple sat holding hands at one of the long tables that were spread around the hall. Sarah explained how she had gotten to town, the job application, and the last conversations she had with her father. She never got the tour of the library, the books forgotten in the sweet stolen moments.

"What if you get the job?" Wilbur asked.

"I don't think he will hire me. I'm a woman and young," she replied

“So, lots of women are working now. This isn’t the ole Queen of England’s country, you know? I hope you get the job. You’ll only be down the street and maybe you can slip here after work,” he voiced both their thoughts.

“Well, you still owe me a tour of the library,” she laughed.

“Oh, geez, yes, well, let’s start over there,” he pointed.

“No, no, you have to help me slip out. I have to get home before Papa comes back from visiting old Mrs. Conners.”

As they crept toward the entryway arm-in-arm without speaking, comfortable just in each other, they hoped time would crawl as slowly. Suddenly, “I’ll be right back,” Wilbur spouted and ducked away.

Alone, she looked around the main room. For the first time that afternoon, her intellectual yearnings surged ahead of her hormones, the books and manuscripts everywhere an aphrodisiac to the mind. Before she could explore the stacks, Wilbur returned, panting, and bearing another key. She turned her attention to him.

“Here, hide this. You won’t have to worry if I am at the door or not next time.” He handed her a key.

Before they reached the glass door and still hidden from street view, they stopped and kissed, gently, tenderly. She broke away, walked to the door, looked out surreptitiously, and exited, leaving him only traces of the sweet smell of her perfume and the sensations of love ringing in his ears.

When Sarah arrived home, she had a new battle to fight. Charles Strozier had stopped on his way home to see her. He had decided not to delay his decision. He wanted her to come to work full-time for him and had chosen to tell her in person. In her absence he had made his decision known to her father.

“She is certainly bright and capable. I have full confidence that she will be very successful in the merchandising business,” he had told her parent who swelled with pride at hearing his daughter being described.

The conservative, Pentecostal preacher and parent chafed, though, at the thought of his daughter working in such a heathen, hedonistic environment. He told the storeowner he would discuss the offer with Sarah and let him know on the morrow, but he had already made up his mind. *Women have no business working outside the home*, he thought. After the shopkeeper left, the more he mulled it over the more upset he became

with himself. “Why did I ever allow her to go to town to seek the job?” he said out loud angrily to an empty room. “I’ll address these new stresses to the feminine role in the social fabric of God’s world in next Sunday’s sermon”

The thoughts and phrases of pulpit rhetoric were flying through his head when Sarah entered the room. He immediately told her the news, more preacher than parent, more dogmatic than sympathetic to a young woman’s desires.

For the third night in a row, there were harsh words in the preacher’s parlor. Sarah had spent the short time walking home preparing to explain her whereabouts if asked. Nothing had prepared her for both the realization of her dreams of having the job at the Mercantile and for the nightmare of an unyielding father. Her rage at his refusal to give her permission to take the job was inflamed by the choice of his words. Later he realized he should have toned down the church-speak and turned up the parental compassion, but the explosion that followed left the relationship of both father and child damaged. Sarah hated losing control, but she was a young adult and now was the time for her to exert her independence.

Separation is never easy, but when fueled by pride, the rift is slow to heal. It would be years before father and daughter would repair the damage caused by parent’s words and child’s actions. The next morning, Sarah sought out the Widow Martin. Though the older woman spoke against the younger’s plan, she acquiesced and agreed to take her into her boardinghouse. The father’s surprise was only exceeded by his wrath when he learned of his daughter’s new residence. He wouldn’t speak to her again for twelve years, but for the next three years, she filled her head with the knowledge available in the library, her heart with the purity of first love, and her self-esteem with the success the Moreau Mercantile job gave her.

* * * *

Lance Randall

New York, New York, USA – September 1, 1903

The *New York Times*' headlines Charles Strozier was reading fairly shouted:

**FASHION SHOW OPENING
Models Fail to Agree on Gowns in
Time to Parade.**

Comfortably ensconced in one of New York's finest hotels with his wife, Anne, and his assistant, Sarah Baxley, the Moreau merchant had looked forward to the opening of the annual fashion show. The ladies of South Georgia were no different than the women of New York, each wishing to maximize their feminine charms with yards of silk and satins. For fashion buyers the event of the year was always the parading of the Paris haute couture's creations at the September show. Unfortunately, this year's event had become quite a laughable event. The writer of the *Times* article Charles was reading conveyed the humor of the previous day's cataclysm.

New York Times

The Fashion Show, latest of the aspirants for popularity in the shape of annual shows, began late yesterday afternoon, the official opening being when shortly after 9 o'clock President of the Board of Aldermen Charles V. Fornes was introduced to a good-sized audience, who had been spectators of the marvels in millinery and other women's raiment.

His address of welcome was received with applause by his hearers, who in the matter of sex were at the time about ten to one of the masculine type. A few minutes later the women had the majority by an overwhelming vote, it being announced that the twelve "most beautiful models in New York" were not to parade about the hall in the latest of Parisian gowns, because each and every one of them, believing herself the most beautiful, had insisted on heading the procession, and that each and every one of them persuaded of her right to wear the "creation," which they had unanimously agreed was the most beautiful of all.

The Synagogue Savant

The preliminaries being over and the Garden being largely deserted by the men who were there to see "the beauties in Paris gowns," the women started investigating as to what was to be seen.

Strozier laughed out loud. The belly laugh, loud and long, brought his wife from the dressing closet.

"What are you so tickled about, my dear?" she asked.

"This article on the model's parade yesterday. . . What a disaster! But I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Watching Charles Fornes nearly faint when all those important men walked out of the hall; they were really mad that the beautiful women were not going to be there . . . I swear that man is just using his seat on the Council as a stepping stool to Congress, and he thought he had a captive audience yesterday." Strozier was red in the face from holding back his laughter; he paused speaking long enough to release another long guffaw.

"And all those women," he continued, "all they wanted was to see the latest fashions. They could have cared less about his speech. A totally wasted opportunity for him, all because those prima donnas couldn't agree on who would wear one dress." And his laughter burst out again.

"I thought it was sad that such a pretty party was spoiled, but Miss Schuyler was very kind to Sarah," his wife responded brightly, trying to change the subject and maintain his good humor.

"I don't like her," Charles replied, his tone going instantly from mirth to snarl.

"Why?"

"That Schuyler woman is a trouble maker. The rumormongers at the synagogue say she's financially backing the Zionist radicals. I don't want you to go near that woman, you hear?" The lightheartedness was gone from his voice.

"You're just saying that because she was a friend of Emma Lazarus," his wife stated. Georgina Schuyler had indeed been a friend of the late poetess and had supported her causes. Earlier in the year, Georgina had financed a memorial to her friend and had it placed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. As a result, her poem had become the symbol of American freedom and opportunity to the world.

Charles Strozier was not an admirer. “That Lazarus woman was a trouble maker too! I think she used the term “Zionist” before even Nathan Birnbaum, but I don’t care about that. We’re all Zionists in that regard. We all pray that we will return Israel to its rightful place, but there are elements in the movement that are too secretive and too violent for our cause. I don’t need to tell you that!”

“Well, don’t ‘choo go spoilin’ Sarah’s time here in New York,” Anne Strozier cooed. “She and Georgina are going out shopping today. Let her enjoy her time here in the city.

“We’ve had great success thus far on this buying trip. I’m quite sure Mrs. Peabody will love the dresses we have acquired, and you know if she likes this year’s fashions, all the women in the county will like them too!” She said, appealing to his practicality. “And you need to be nice to Charles Fornes too, you know. He’s one of the most successful wool distributors here in New York. We need his help to stock our shelves.”

Her admonishment was not ignored. Strozier knew that while he had the “head” for the business, she was the “heart.”

Even as the couple’s conversation turned to business, Sarah was waiting in the lobby for her escort. The day before at the garment industry event Georgina Schuyler had introduced herself to Sarah, knowing it would nettle the young woman’s employer. To her delight, she found the young woman charming, and the two women had spent most of the social time that evening together. The social matron didn’t like Charles any more than he liked her, and being strong-willed, she had no intention of being snubbed or ignored. Her own interests were similar to the Strozier’s; only hers were in the role of financier. More accurately, she was a private behind-the-scenes dealmaker that enabled new invention and creative talent to thrive. Generally, she had been successful despite her advisor’s apprehensions. Her “advisors” were her father’s counselors, left over as a condition in the old man’s will. She never hesitated to ignore them when she felt so inclined, and her track record was pretty good. She saw in Sarah some of her spirited self, but she also recognized the talent that the young woman’s current employer, Charles Strozier, had seen. Today was not just a social event for Georgina.

A livery attired young man approached the settee where Sarah was seated. "Good morning, Miss Baxley," he said as he bowed at the waist. "Miss Schuyler requests the company of your presence."

Sarah laughed to herself, because she knew the young man was watching her admiringly as she rose from the sofa. *New York boys are just as obvious as their country cousins*, she noted to herself.

"Please, lead the way," she smiled and headed for the revolving doors, making the servant nervous that the short train on her stylish dress might get caught in the mechanism.

The elegant carriage waiting outside was drawn by four handsome horses and driven by an older version of the young man escorting Sarah. She gracefully entered the carriage with the help of the liveryman and alighted on soft velvet cushions next to the elegantly dressed sophisticated older woman awaiting her.

"Good morning, Sarah," Georgina Schuyler greeted.

"Good morning, Miss Schuyler. Thank you for inviting me," Sarah replied.

"Please call me Georgina. It makes me feel, oh, so much younger and not quite the old maid."

Georgina Schuyler, in her late sixties, was a heavy-set woman. Her long face and rounded features were not aristocratic, but her bearing was regal reflecting the breeding of the Schuyler's. Her great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth, was the wife of Alexander Hamilton. Her sister, Louisa Lee Schuyler, was a social reformer and philanthropist well-known throughout New York State.

"So, my dear, I thought we would begin our journey today by visiting the Statue of Liberty. You know it's dear to my heart and my sister's."

"I would love that," replied Sarah. "I've done a great deal of study about your friend Emma Lazarus. I would really like for you to tell me what she was like."

The older woman's face changed dramatically, her countenance softening and her eyes misting. "Most of my friends and the people I am around are tired of hearing about Emma. It would be my pleasure to share with you. She was a remarkable woman."

Over the next few hours, Sarah's new friend talked about her old friend. As they toured the sights of New York, the matronly woman

described her and Emma's efforts to improve education for women. Those efforts included both women signing a petition to admit women to Columbia in 1883. That petition also bore the names of Ulysses S. Grant, Susan B. Anthony, Chester A. Garfield and others. Several years later, both women helped to found Barnard College of Fine Arts for Women in New York.

"Do you still know anyone at the college?" Sarah asked.

"Know anyone? My dear, I still sit on the Board and give substantial funds to see its improvement," the old woman said, her ample body swelling even further with pride.

"I wish I could go to college, but here I am twenty-one and no money," Sarah stated matter-of-factly.

Georgina turned in the carriage seat and looked at the young woman. With a quick counter-twist she spoke to the driver, and he turned the carriage at the next corner. Two hours later, Sarah was enrolled at the college. Georgina shushed the young woman when she began to fret about living arrangements and costs. In her most dominant matronly manner, she insisted that her new charge live with her while she studied.

At 5 o'clock that afternoon over tea, Sarah broke the news to the Strozier's, much to Charles's chagrin and to Anne's delight. She also sent a telegram to her father later that evening. The Strozier's left New York and the Fashion Show without her.

When a young man in Georgia heard the news, he was crushed by her decision.

* * * *

At age twenty, Sarah had two loves: education and Wilbur. The prospect of a college education and the excitement of New York had won. After he found out about her decision, Wilbur's adjustment was to return his focus to his work. More than anything he wanted to complete the work the old man had started.

He had loved the old man. Before the rabbi's death, Wilbur reveled in watching him work. The old craftsman's hands were bent and gnarled from decades of sculpting wood, but his mind was incredibly sharp, a brilliant intellect that was driven to finish his life's purpose. After decades

of study, some men write books on their subjects. Some men lecture on their heroes. The rabbi's goal was to replicate his paladin's accomplishment. Like Bezalel, he wanted to build the ark of the covenant.

In Russia as a young boy, he had begun his study of the Torah. The son of a furniture carpenter, he admired his father and enjoyed the hours working with him in his workshop much more than the hours spent with the old bearded black-robed rabbi in the synagogue. His teacher, however, recognized the boy's preferences, and seeking to motivate him, introduced the young man to Bezalel, the son of Uri.

The Torah – Shemot – Chapter 31

And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: 'See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise skillful works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of workmanship.'

Thus began a lifelong quest by Rabbi Henri Ziegler to be filled with the Spirit of God in a way that he could devise “skillful works” that would please God. The young man filled his mind with rabbinical studies and calloused his hands with a workman's devotion to his craft, but eventually time passed and the young man became the old rabbi, his mind still filled with a lifetime of knowledge and research, but the worn arthritic hands too sore and stiff to fulfill his mission. Thirteen years ago he knew Jehovah God sent new hands to him, but five of those years had passed before he dared to trust the orphan boy with his secret. During that time he watched the child become the young man, growing in knowledge and in the skill of an elite craftsman. Finally he shared his clandestine project. For the last eight years, the elder's goal had become Wilbur's. Now youthful hands, under the direction of the wiser mind, became the instruments recreating Bezalel's workmanship. The young man idolized the old man; he was dedicated to fulfilling his mentor's dream.

The workshop hidden below the stacks of library books was crammed with worn worktables holding tools, clamps, and a partially completed

project. The two men while huddled over one end of a workbench often talked.

“Jesus was a carpenter,” the young man said, and then paused the strokes of his box plane on the acacia tightly clamped in a vise.

“And your point is?” the old man said, his caliper poised to measure the object in the vise. Shavings were piled around the men’s feet, curls so thin you could read a newspaper through them, the wood golden and blemish free.

Wilbur saw the points of the caliper bind on the wood. Almost before the gnarled hands could pull the curved tips of the tool away from the wood, the youth began the gentle strokes of the plane expecting the old man to scold him for his lack of accuracy, but the swish of the wood on the sharp edge of the metal blade made the old man smile. He loved that sound. He was also captivated by the smell; the lumber’s oils released imprisoned aromas held within the cellulose fibers of the wood.

The young man focused on his work, but continued his argument. “Well, Bezalel was from the tribe of Judah and so was Jesus. Matthew says he descended from Perez, the son of Judah and Tamar. So why wouldn’t God use a carpenter to save the world? He used Bezalel to save the nation, or at least his workmanship did. I mean, without the ark, would the Jordan River have parted and allowed the troops to cross on dry land? Would the walls of Jericho have fallen? Would the enemies of Israel been destroyed? Would men drop dead from just touching the sides the ark? If he could impart that kind of power in the work of Bezalel, couldn’t he have given a carpenter a thousand years later the power to use the wood of the cross to free men’s souls?”

“It wasn’t the ark that did those things, it was God,” the elder replied. “He used the ark as a symbol of his power.”

“As he used the cross,” the younger interrupted.

“I know your Christian faith believes Jesus is the Messiah, but claiming to be the Son of God is hardly demonstrating God’s power by dying.”

“That’s my point; the power of the cross is that it had no power,” the young man laid down the plane and unbent his back. Standing up straight, he was a foot taller than the Russian-born rabbi. “The power of the ark was the fact that God chose to reside in the work fashioned by Bezalel.

The power of the cross is that God became man and refused to be confined to its finality. In overcoming death, He gave us all eternal life.”

“You make your point well, my son, but you must make the leap of faith that God came as man for your argument to stand.”

“It’s the same leap of faith to say God gave the power to Bezalel to create something as powerful as the ark.”

“Yes, it is,” the old eyes sparkled. “And a bigger leap of faith, that he will empower us the skill to recreate the ark to restore my people’s faith in God.”

The two men stood close, the tension in their discussion holding them together as much as the small work piece in the vise. They looked each other in the eyes, the unspoken language of two men bound together, dedicated to a single purpose, each for a different reason, and each as deeply committed. Both broke their gaze at the same moment and bent to finishing their task. The caliper slipped perfectly over the wood. They were one step closer to their goal.

When in 1899, the rabbi died, and the conversations stopped, Wilbur missed the old man. The rabbi would have told him what to do about the girl. For the last three years, the rabbi’s absence had been bearable, but now with the girl in New York, his young charge had two empty spots in his heart.

* * * *

Kiev, Russia – January 9, 1910

Vilna shook the snow from his coat. His wife wouldn’t be happy with the moist mess it would leave just inside the door. Since they did not have a mud room or foyer, she expected him to take his coat off outside, shake it, and then enter. It was freezing outside. He had decided to brave her wrath rather than bare his torso to the cold. *Someday, he thought, I’ll have more than this hovel to come home to and a wife that doesn’t remind me constantly of the deprivations she endures.*

He knew the melting snow at the threshold wasn’t the only thing that would set her off tonight. Telling her he was going to America on business would take care of that. *Should I tell her in Yiddish or Russian?* He

debated with himself. It really didn't matter, he decided. She would yell at him in both languages, colorfully actually. One consolation, though, he knew five other men were faced with the same likelihood of verbal abuse this evening. During their clandestine meeting, the group had decided to confide their destination, but none dared reveal to their wives or families the real reason for the trip abroad.

Ostensibly, they were going to New York to raise money from American Jews for the formation of another kibbutz in Palestine. Just the year before, Kibbutz Deganim was formed as a result of the study and development of a young Jewish economist named Arthur Ruppin. Commune settlements in the Promised Land were a natural fulfillment of the Zionist movement, which had formally started thirteen years earlier.

These six young men headed to the United States, however, were part of a group much more zealous about a Jewish homeland. Their group, Am Ha-Aron (phonetically ahm ha-ahrone), was a secret Jewish society. The Hebrew words meant, "The People of the Ark." These "People" were dedicated to seizing control of Palestine from Turkey's control. They intended to do so with a biblical weapon – the ark of the covenant itself.

Torah told the story of how God directed Moses to build the ark, but it was Joshua who used the ark to lead the people into the Promised Land. The ark's powers parted the waters of the Jordan and gave them victory in many battles over a vastly superior warrior people. The presence of the ark caused city walls to fall, men to die, and huge armies to be destroyed. Through the centuries, the ark was lost, the Promised Land conquered, and the chosen people dispersed throughout the world. The prayer of every Jew was to see the restoration of the land of his birthright. The People, as the members of Am Ha-Aron called themselves, were confident they could not be defeated in their quest of a reoccupied Israel if they regained control of the ark.

This "quest" had a name. In 1890, an Austrian Jewish publicist named Nathan Birnbaum had written in a publication entitled, "Self-Emancipation," about a concept he called "Zionism." Birnbaum described Zionism as a nationalistic effort to restore Jewish sovereignty over Israel and return the Jewish people to the land of the Torah. As the movement had grown, so had the resistance from Muslims within Palestine, the Ottoman Empire, the Turks, the British, and other nations

shepherding the region. Violence grew as the radical Jewish elements lost patience. Am Ha-Aron was one of the more fanatical entities involved, but their battle was for control of the one tool they knew would win the larger war. They were fearless in their efforts to find the ark.

The ark reportedly was hidden in a variety of places, under the Dome of the Rock, within the foundation of the Temple Mount, Ethiopia, and other spots throughout the Middle East.

At the moment, the location of the ark was not the concern. Vilna Valanoshova faced another more personal battle. Because of his training as an Am Ha-Aron agent, he cowered to no one, except for this one diminutive, dark-haired thirty-year-old woman. "Lesya, I need to talk with you, come into the kitchen right now," he called using his "I'm-the-head-of-the-household" voice.

"What? What is it? Is there trouble again?" she asked jumping to conclusions that another anti-Semitic attack had been made on their community. "What a mess you've made on the floor," she said in the same breath, pointing to the puddling ice by the door. "Are you going to clean that up?"

Vilna debated momentarily which battle to fight first. She chose for him. "Was anyone hurt? Who started it?"

"No, there's no trouble. I just need to tell you that I will be going out of town on business in the morning," he braced himself as he spoke.

"Where?" she drawled the Yiddish gutturally implying he better give the right answer.

"America."

"America? You're going to America and you're not taking me?" she exploded. The verbalizations that followed rocketed and ricocheted around the room alternating between Russian and Yiddish. Lesya's volume grew along with the ardor of her feelings about being left behind.

The eruption waned some when he answered her question about the purpose of his trip. She had great sympathy for the members of her race being pushed out of Russia. Practically everyone was related to someone that had been expelled from Moscow by Grand Duke Segai in 1891. Over fourteen thousand Jewish families had been given the choice to convert to Christianity, become prostitutes, or move to the Pale of Settlement, an Eastern Russian/Ukraine territory authorized for Jewish settlement by

Catherine the Great. In 1903 and subsequent years, pogroms increasingly forced Jews out of Russia. Tens of thousands headed to Israel, increasing pressure on the Ottoman Empire. The result was more violence and more fanatical groups organizing immigration.

Lesya suspected that Vilna was involved in one of these factions. Torn between wanting to know and being afraid to know, she had never summoned the courage to confront him. “How long will you be gone?” she ventured as her initial wrath fizzled.

“Several months at least,” he replied with a shrug.

“Will it be dangerous?” she asked tentatively, her question as close to an inquiry about his affairs as she had ever ventured.

“No,” he lied. “We just have to raise a lot of money from rich American Jews.”

True, they would spend time raising money, but the focus of their quest would indeed be much more dangerous.

* * * *

Kiev, Russia – January 10, 1910

The man was a Labavitcher, a Hasidic Jew who followed the teachings of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, an eighteenth century intellectual who taught Jewish mysticism and the use of the intellect to guide the emotions. The sect had begun in Labavitch, Russia; appropriately the city’s name meant ‘brotherly love.’

His dark clothes and overcoat, the beard spilling down his chest, and the neatly pleated black-rimmed hat, helped him to blend into the Jewish ghetto community. The café’s outdoor tables were empty, covered with snow, but the man had staked out a table inside by the window presumably for the light to read his book. He had come shortly before daybreak, the proprietors’ first customer; his focus, however, was not on the coffee or the book’s page, but on the black door across the street.

Two blocks away, outside the Jewish sector, the Catholic Church’s bells rang out at 8:00 am, the sound carrying across the rooftops, the chimes apparently alerting the occupants of the home the Labavitcher

surveilled. The black door opened and a slender man of medium height stepped out. From the café, the Labavitcher could see directly into the man's parlor; a woman stood in the dim interior light, one hand on her hip, the other on the edge of the door. She closed the door behind him sharply and then reopened it to stand in the portal. The young man set down his traveling bag, took her hands, kissed the back of both, and then picked up his valise to walk down the street. He didn't look back.

Hurrying to follow him, the Labavitcher threw two coins on the table, grabbed his hat and book and stepped quickly through the narrow snow covered street. The man he was following was a known Am Ha-Aron agent. Because the People of the Ark preached hatred while the Labavitch organization, called the Chabad, taught love, it had been very easy for the American to recruit him. This was not the first time he had reported the Am Ha-Aron agent's movements. The expected route this man and his peers would take to New York was already known, reported minutes after they purchased their tickets at the shipyard by another of Isaac Bernard's network of merchant/shipping agents. His job this morning was to confirm that six men would get on a steamship named the *Retvizan*, scheduled to sail down the Dnieper River to Odessa, from where they would pick up a freighter that would cross the Black Sea, sail into the Aegean, then through the Mediterranean and on to New York; it seemed to him a long journey for such a dubious cause. He was certain there was no place for hatred and violence in the Jewish traditions.

The young man ahead of him - his name was Vilna Valanoshova - shifted the valise to his other hand as he turned the corner. The older man rounded the corner moments later, and immediately realized his mistake. It was a narrow dead end alley. The crash of two of Vilna's friends changed the momentum of his body before he could make a correction; the force slammed him against the brick wall knocking the wind out of his lungs. Fearing he would not catch his breath was his next to last thought. A six-inch knife penetrated directly beneath his breastbone at a forty-five degree upward angle and punched open a hole that led to heart failure within seconds. The older man slid down the wall and slumped over sideways into the snow. The red stain on his chest grew seeping into the ends of his grey beard.

Lance Randall

Vilna and his friends ran the last six blocks to the dock. The other three members of their party leaned against the rail above them as they climbed the ramp. They were the last to board the steamer before it cast off.

* * * *

New York, New York, USA – April 10, 1910

“Please go to the cellar and get two more bottles of the Chateau Rothschild ’98, Mr. Richards.” The young woman giving instructions concentrated on the table setting for twelve people in the dining room of one of New York society’s elite. Sarah had served as Georgia Schuyler’s aide for nearly seven years now. Juggling college studies and social engagements for the first four years, she had impressed the older woman with her skill and grace under pressure. Standing under the glittering chandeliers, her confidence and ability shone as brightly as the sparkling lights.

“Yes ma’am. Do you want more sherry brought up as well?” the butler asked.

“Yes, you might as well. We have ten very important people coming tonight, and my experience is, the more “important” the person, the larger their thirst,” she said with a pursed-lipped smile.

“That reminds me Miss Baxley,” the butler said, missing the facetiousness in her voice, “Mr. Bernard likes a sweet red wine. Shall I also get some of the muscadine wine Mr. Strozier brought us from Georgia on his last buying trip?”

“Yes, excellent,” she responded, a glimmer of uncertainty in her voice.

She was not sure whether she wanted to impress Isaac Bernard or not. His friendship with Georgina was based upon their mutual association with Emma Lazarus, the New York Jewish socialite/poetess who had died in 1887 after an extended trip to Europe. Lazarus and Bernard had been involved in immigration issues, and especially Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe because of the pogroms. The conversations in Georgina’s parlor often became heated when Bernard was present.

When the butler left the room, Sarah took the opportunity to look over the guest list. While most of Georgina's society dinners were balanced events with an equal number of men and women, occasionally she held small dinner parties with her activist women friends, or the leadership of social reform groups, most of whom were men. In addition to Isaac Bernard, tonight's affair included the directors of movements promoting immigration from Russia and Poland to the United States, a German anarchist, and the leaders of two different Zionist organizations. The only women on the seating chart were Georgina, Sarah, and Rachel Ardsley. Rachel and her husband, Dmitri, were frequent visitors to the Schuyler home. The trio of Rachel, Georgina and Emma had been a friendship that bridged many social and political boundaries.

The youngest of the cabal was Rachel. Only eighteen when she met Emma Lazarus, she became to the poetess what Sarah now was to Georgina. Over the next nine years, Rachel had been involved in most of Emma's enterprises and had traveled with her throughout Europe. Even though ten years Emma's junior, Rachel had been one of the woman's Hebrew teachers when the woman "discovered" her roots and made the commitment to educate herself in the language and traditions of her race. With knowledge came the desire to become involved in the issues most important to her ethnic community. The three women became immersed in Jewish and immigration issues.

Emma had been the driving force behind the group, but upon her death Georgina and Rachel had continued, their efforts redoubled by their commitment to honor Emma's memory. Sarah liked Rachel.

"The wine, milady. . . Would you like me to decant it now or shall I wait until the guests arrive?" the head of the servant household interrupted her thoughts as he returned to the room.

"Do it now Justin, we will be busy at the last and may forget it. I don't want Mr. Bernard to be disappointed," she said leaving the room to dress for the evening.

As the evening unfolded Sarah greeted the guests and saw to it that the butler announced them to the gathering crowd. Georgina was in rare form, chatting casually with people, treating each one with celebrity whether or not he or she deserved it. Her only pause was when Isaac Bernard's party entered the room.

Without any subtlety the man scanned the room for the hostess. Her stoutness draped in fashionable silk and chiffon was easily located in the crowded room. Immediately he pushed his way through the socially dressed gathering, his coarse suit, street worn shoes, and rude manner creating a wake of turned heads behind him. The old elegantly dressed matron stood firmly and resolutely as she too watched his collision course through the room.

“Good evening, Mr. Bernard,” she tilted her head in greeting.

“Good evening! Thank you for inviting me,” the man replied stiffly. He was taller than she, and nearly as broad, but he seemed dwarfed by the yards of crisp colorful material enveloping her rounder body. He braved the feminine folds to lean in and socially peck her cheek.

“I need to speak with you privately at your earliest convenience.” His sibilant whisper was audible only to her. There was a flicker of concern on her face, but it was replaced immediately with an expression that could only mean ‘step back, you’re in my space.’

Sarah didn’t need to hear his words. After years as Georgina’s aide, she could read her mentor’s body language. “Mr. Bernard,” she said to get his attention as she stepped into the ring of tension.

He turned toward the attractive young woman. “Miss Baxley,” he acknowledged.

“Miss Schuyler asked me to make sure we decanted some of my Georgia ancestor’s muscadine wine for you to enjoy. Would you allow me to pour you a glass personally?” her Southern accent as sweetly tempting as the wine.

With what social grace he could muster, the intense man bowed to his hostess, “Why, thank you for your thoughtfulness, Miss Schuyler. You know all my weaknesses.” An *entendre* was not missed by some of the guests overhearing his words, their minds impurely doubling the wine and Sarah’s womanliness with his weakness, but that was not his meaning and it was not missed by Georgina. She knew the “weakness” he referred to would be the topic of their conversation.

“Please, Miss Baxley, lead me on to this nectar of the south,” he said and started toward where the bar was set up in the corner.

“Please this way, Mr. Bernard. I have it specially set up in the drawing room for you if you will allow me to lead the way?”

“Why, of course,” he replied as the conversations swirling around Georgina restarted at their former volumes before his intrusion.

Sarah paused before the door to the room that held the decanted wine and waited as the man caught up with her and reached around to politely open the door. The wine poured, they waited quietly, and neither made a pretense of conversation as both anticipated the mansion’s feminine owner. Later Georgina would thank her assistant for the choreography of delicately removing the Jewish leader from the socialite-filled room, but her only comment as she swished into the room was a curt dismissal. Sarah turned to pull the door closed as she backed out of the room. They did not speak until the door was closed and the latch clicked metallically into its notch.

“OK, Isaac, what seems to be the problem?”

“I was right. The People of the Ark have sent a team. They arrived in New York yesterday.”

“Exactly what do they expect to accomplish coming here?” Georgina asked.

“The official purpose is to raise money for immigration of Russians to Israel, but you and I both know this group has heard the rumors about the ark. If the rumor is true, and if the ark is as powerful as it is purported to be, then this group will stop at nothing to gain control of it,” his eyes hooded conspiratorially as the intensity in his voice increased.

“I don’t understand,” Georgina stated. “The ark was lost three thousand years ago when the First Temple was destroyed during the exile of the Jewish nation. Since that time there have been dozens of theories of what happened to it. It’s in Ethiopia. It’s in Egypt. It’s in a warehouse somewhere, hidden by an unfriendly government. It’s buried beneath the Temple Mount. God only knows where it is, but why would there be some theory that the ark is here in the United States?”

“No one thinks the original ark of the covenant is in New York, or anywhere else on this continent for that matter,” he replied.

Before he could continue, she spoke exasperatedly, “Well, now I’m really confused. You said they were here for the ark.”

“They are, sort of. Let me explain.

“God gave specific instructions of how the ark was to be constructed and what its purpose was to be. If you have a Torah or Christian Bible handy, we can read the details. It’s all right there.”

“Yes, of course. We learned all this as children.” Patience was not one of Georgina’s strong suits, but she did use the interruption to point to a copy of the Torah lying on the table.

“The key to its construction,” Isaac continued as he thumbed open the book, “was that God filled a particular craftsman with his Spirit, so that the instructions would be understood and the ark properly prepared for God to use as a place to manifest his presence among the Israelites. That guy was Bezalel, but God knew that one man alone could not produce all the worship instruments that were needed to fill the tabernacle or eventually the temple when it was finally built.

“Read from right here,” he pointed to a passage in Shemot Chapter 31 in the opened Torah.

“I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Abisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee. . .”

“Now before you keep reading, this next part is all the stuff God wanted made,” he inserted.

She read on: *“ . . . the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the ark-cover that is thereupon, and all the furniture of the Tent; and the table and its vessels, and the pure candlestick with all its vessels, and the altar of incense; and the altar of burnt-offering with all its vessels, and the laver and its base; and the plaited garments, and the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, to minister in the priest's office; and the anointing oil, and the incense of sweet spices for the holy place; according to all that I have commanded thee shall they do.”*

“Stop there,” he interrupted. “These two guys were responsible for leading a group of craftsmen in the making of the instruments that God would use to communicate with his people. There is no indication they even had the skill to do it, because if you jump over a couple of pages it says: ‘He filled (them) with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of workmanship.’ And I think the key is he gave them the ‘wisdom of the heart,’” the man wiggled his fingers in the air to mime quotation marks. “He didn’t just give them ‘wisdom’ which would have implied skill; he gave these guys ‘wisdom of the heart.’ Whatever it was it was powerful!”

“OK, but what has that got to do with the Am Ha-Aron group being here in New York? We both agree that the ark is not in the United States. And these People of the ark, as they are wont to be called, aren’t going to waste time here unless it means gaining the power to seize the Promised Land back,” Georgina shrugged in confusion.

“The rumor is not that the original ark is here, but rather that God has anointed another Bezalel and Oholiab, and that these two men are rebuilding the ark,” he said.

“Well, that’s the silliest thing I ever heard of,” she caught herself. “But, I guess God can do whatever he wants.”

“You bet, Ezekiel says that the temple is God’s throne and that he will dwell there forever. He spends a great deal of time explaining that the final temple will be filled with the instruments God designed to fulfill the worship and ordinances he commanded. Obviously, all the original items we just read about have been lost and will certainly have to be remade. Ezekiel doesn’t specifically name the ark, but without it the temple is not complete. If you have to remake one piece, why not all . . . including the Ark?

“The only questions then become: ‘who’ and ‘how’?”

“And the Am Ha-Aron think these new Bezalel and Oholiab’s are in New York?” she asked.

“No, their sources in Eastern Europe report to them that a rabbi immigrated to the United States many years ago. As a young man, he had committed his life’s work to the ark and wrote a very difficult analysis of the issues we’ve just been talking about. Some consider it a *‘perushim’*, a commentary worthy of being a part of classic rabbinic literature. No one has heard from him for years, but recently there are reports that a rabbi and his young assistant, with the help of a rich department store owner, have built a fabulous library specializing in research on the ark. And it’s in the same area the old rabbi had settled when he came to America.”

“Where is that?” she asked.

“Some place down south, called Moreau, Georgia.”

“Moreau. . . Georgia? Why that’s where Sarah is from!” Georgina’s face flushed with excitement, and then in a moment, when she remembered the womanly conversations she had shared with her young charge, concern overwhelmed her.

Isaac Bernard, his glass untouched during their conversation, finally sipped the Georgia muscadine wine poured for him earlier, allowing his hostess time to think through the consequences of her new found knowledge. While not a patient man under normal circumstances, he had methodically led the social scion through the background. Now both knew the purpose of his being here. He waited for her to realize what was required and for her to volunteer.

"I can't ask her to do that . . . she hasn't seen him in seven years . . . what if . . . ?" Each pause caused wrinkles in her already furrowed brow. Her jaw was set though hidden behind the jowls of fine dining. The polemic raging within her mind was visible to the man who calmly sipped the sweet liqueur so recently fermented in the very apex of their storm. She had so many arguments to give the man, but her own thoughts fomented the counterarguments. Finally she yielded, not because his eyes were silently pressuring her, but because she knew it was for the greater good. *Emma would have made this sacrifice*, she rationalized to herself. And finally in an unaccustomedly small voice for such a big woman, "I'll go get her."

"No," he put the hand not holding his drink up to restrain her.

"You've been gone from your party too long. Your guests will think I've kidnapped you. Bring the girl to the synagogue on Fourth Avenue at midnight. Try not to be seen."

Nothing more was said. He drained the last of the wine, set the glass down, and left the room. The old woman pushed her fear deep down, put on her social face, and followed him into the party. Georgina found Sarah with some of the radical intellectuals who were often writing editorials for a Jewish state. Pulling her away from the lively discussion ostensibly to discuss the party's wine supply, the old woman quickly briefed Sarah on her conversation with Bernard and prepared her for their rendezvous later that evening.

When all the guests had departed, Sarah and Georgina drove to the meeting site in the older woman's least conspicuous automobile, a 1909 Peerless Model 30. It was like riding a zebra in the Kentucky Derby. Not only was the car flamboyant, but Georgina's driving scared Sarah to death. The car suited Georgina's personality perfectly, however. With over 50 horsepower, seating for seven passengers, and a long flashy hood, it was

one of the most expensive cars manufactured that year, costing over \$7000 and not at all inconspicuous. Isaac Bernard had instructed the older woman to avoid attention and admonished her to bring only Sarah. As instructed they had left the chauffeur and servants home, but in 1910, a woman driving an automobile would attract attention, especially this car, nevertheless the social matron was determined to ride to the clandestine meeting in style. The synagogue Isaac had chosen for their surreptitious gathering was in a reasonably good neighborhood, so the women did not feel threatened even at the late hour.

"How do you know Mr. Bernard?" Sarah asked, keeping her eyes locked on the road ahead as the long hood of the expensive automobile flashed over potholes and manhole covers.

"Through Emma," the socialite replied; her hair whipped around her face, she took one hand off the steering wheel and pushed the strands from her eyes. "Isaac had a crush on her. During the years she was in Europe, it's my understanding that they were very active in the Jewish efforts to establish settlements in Israel. Since her death, he's traveled the world a great deal trying to raise money and bring political pressure on our government to resist Turkey's efforts to limit immigration. Unfortunately, some of his efforts have been less than above board and he has become a pariah to his own cause. I wouldn't be surprised if he were becoming more deeply involved with some of the more radical elements of Jewish Zionism."

"We're going to find out shortly," the younger woman replied warily as the car squealed around the corner.

Pulling up in front of the synagogue, the two women exited the car. The front door of the building was ajar; Sarah tugged the heavy ornate portal open. The two women found themselves in the front antechamber, the quiet stillness of the sanctuary just beyond.

"Over here," a man's voice echoed softly.

"It's Isaac Bernard," he said in the faded moonlight filtering through the windows. He stepped forward and stuck out his hand toward Sarah, ignoring the portly matron beside her. Sarah nodded, but didn't step forward to take his hand. Even in the semi-darkness, she was intimidated by the man's hulking appearance, short thick neck, square broad shoulders, and barrel chest hidden beneath a loose fitting suit. In the

shadows his facial features were not easily discernable, but she remembered he had the nose, cheekbones and jowl of a fighter.

"Mr. Bernard," she said, instinctively moving closer to Georgina.

"Isaac, you've dragged us out of our home into the night air and into the darkness for this cloak and dagger meeting. Let's get to the point," Georgina commanded in a voice she often used to direct servants.

The man bristled in the dark, but responded bluntly, "Miss Baxley, thank you for coming. Our organization needs your assistance."

Sarah's mind raced. *What organization? What did Georgina have to do with this man, and most importantly, what could he want from her?* She knew him only as a party guest and friend of her mentor. She trusted Georgina and had agreed to this strange meeting when she was asked, but her employer had refused to answer her most basic questions during their drive.

"May we sit down over here in the pews?" he asked and then directed them to a seat. He sat in the pew in front of the one they chose and then twisted around uncomfortably to be able to talk directly with them.

Sarah inhaled to begin her search for answers. He spoke before she could form the words, "As you know, my work is usually limited to trying to influence our government to support the Zionism movement. In this case, however, I have been hired to act as a private investigator by a group of Jewish clerics. They have asked me to locate the writings of a Russian emigrant who settled in the southern part of the United States. This rabbi did research that interests my employers very much and could have some impact on our cause."

"And how am I involved in this?"

"The rabbi was considered a little kooky in his native land. No one took his scholarship seriously, but through the years, rumors and hints have come back to my friends that his work was bearing fruit. They want to see his work to see if he has done something that will advance our cause." Isaac was trying to avoid explaining the importance of the ark to this Gentile woman if he could.

Before she could re-ask her question, he continued, "The old rabbi built quite a library and you're from the town where he settled. It's our understanding that you know the night watchman. We also know that you've spent some time studying in the library. We need your help finding the rabbi's writings. Will you help us?"

How did they know that? Sarah thought.

Sarah looked at Georgina and could make out her nod of encouragement. The young naive girl that had come to New York for a fashion show seven years earlier had grown into a sophisticated young woman capable of critical thinking. Bernard's explanation she knew was not complete.

"What is so important about this cleric's work?" she asked.

It was Isaac's turn to inhale deeply before beginning the story he had told Georgina earlier in the evening. He explained it all as quickly as he could, the history of the ark, its significance to the power of the Jewish nation, and the predictions of its return to prominence. In the quietness of the synagogue, his words seemed to take on a life of their own.

"What do you want me to do?" Sarah asked. Her question caused Georgina to sag in relief. To this point, the older woman had not been sure her charge would cooperate.

"We need you to return home and renew your friendship with the young man guarding the property. We'll instruct you on what to look for. I'll stay in Savannah. If I were to enter the small town where the library is, I would do nothing but attract attention."

"Well, actually we have a lot of out-of-towners visit the library. The local hotel would accommodate you and you wouldn't be out of place," she contributed.

"OK. I'll think about that. Can you be ready to leave at 8:00 in the morning? By train we can be there overnight."

Georgina assured him that Sarah would be at the train station on time, and the women returned home to pack and get one or two hours sleep.

* * * *

At the corner of West Avenue and Ocean Parkway, two men in overcoats waited. It was a warm April evening; two or three degrees above normal for ten o'clock in the evening, but the breeze off the Lower Bay made the temperature in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn pleasant. The Russian enclave surrounded them; it was an area some called "Little Odessa." The dark figures fidgeted, making their overdressed appearance all the more suspicious, something they desperately wanted to avoid.

"I'm worried. They should have been here by now," one said nervously partly in Yiddish and partly in Russian.

"Step back against the building, Sergei. Stay in the shadows. They'll be here when they get here. And speak American. You know what Yegor told us," Vilna replied in heavily accented English.

The wide boulevard of Ocean Parkway had little traffic at that hour, but the two men didn't have to wait long before a 1908 Ford Touring Car with its top folded back stuttered to a stop. Three men already occupied the two rows of seats, but the lone occupant in the back seat slid over to allow the newcomers to climb aboard. The driver shifted the floor gears and released the automobile to begin its forward progress again. Warm and conspicuous on the corner in their overcoats, the combined winds off the water and the automobiles speed as they approached the shore made the men glad they were wrapped in the dark wool. The only problems were the guns. While standing, the shotguns hidden under their coats hung inconspicuously by their side. Now seated in the cramped rear seat of Henry Ford's creation, they poked crude silhouettes like tent poles. Standing, the concealed weapons could have been brought to bear on a target in moments, but seated, quick action would have more likely resulted in wounds to the sensitive body parts of the men rather than the enemy. Both men fidgeted uncomfortably, waited impatiently for the car to reach its destination, and hoped that a cop didn't stop them.

"Where's Yegor?" Vilna asked, leaning forward around his problematic weapon to address the driver.

"We have to meet him at the house. Did you complete your mission?" the driver responded.

"Yes, they don't know anything."

"How can you be sure?" the driver asked, looking back over his shoulder as much to make sure he was heard as to check the direction of the rod standing hidden between the man's legs.

"A 12-gauge between a man's eyes is a good truth serum," the dark-haired man replied and tilted the weapon slightly away from the driver's direction reducing his chastising scowl.

"When we get to the boarding house, grab your things and let's head to the railway station as quickly as we can. Sergei, you grab my stuff while I return the car to our sponsor," the driver instructed in Russian. "He will

be very glad it is coming back to him with no new holes,” he said in English and laughed crudely at his own joke.

The group was quiet for the next few minutes until they stopped in front of a two-story structure desperately in need of repair and paint. Little light filtered around the curtains covering the windows. The porch was dark and uninviting. The front passenger hopped out, and waited while the two shotgun carriers struggled to stand up without exposing their weapons. The butt of the gun carried by Sergei clipped the back of the driver’s head as he struggled to exit the back seat. The wounded man cupped a hand over the knot that instantly appeared and let out a string of curses in Russian. While Sergei stood over him in the back seat, his gun protruding obscenely from his coat, the wounded man leaned over the steering wheel and continued his tirade. Vilna and the other two men standing on the sidewalk began to laugh at the comical scene.

Suddenly the front door of the boardinghouse opened and the bright glow from inside spilled out to cast the group’s shadows across the dark road. The men turned instinctively toward the light. In the open door stood the silhouette of a broad-shouldered figure nearly as tall as the opening of the doorway. Though the features of the man’s shadowed face were undistinguishable, the men in the street instantly sobered their actions, moving quietly up the walk and into the residence, all without a word. The driver let out the gears and sputtered off to return the car they had borrowed.

Inside Vilna started toward his room to pack his few belongings as he had been instructed earlier. Passing by the dining table scattered with papers, he noticed a large road map unfolded. GEORGIA was printed in large letters in the upper right hand corner, but the shapes on the map did not match the Georgia he knew, and then he recalled that one of the states of this country he was visiting was named Georgia, also. *That’s where we are headed*, he thought.

The train trip from New York was tiring, but it was nothing compared to the thirty-five days it had taken them to travel through oceans and seas to reach New York. Finding the information they needed to pinpoint the exact location of their target had taken longer in New York than they hoped. Though resistance had been expected, they had not calculated the loyalty exhibited by most of their suspects. Their persuasion techniques,

while not dainty, had been effective, however. Especially helpful had been an old warehouse manager. The former employee of the Bernard Brothers Shipping Line had been particularly uncooperative until his granddaughter went missing. Shortly thereafter he had supplied them with the dates and destinations of the shipments from a Russian rabbi over the last ten years. How he had obtained them, they didn't care, but the young girl found her way home with only one scratch, a small nick on her neck and a message that the old man should keep his mouth shut.

Yegor promised them an overnight in Atlanta, clean sheets and a soft bed before heading south by car. They had discussed whether the next leg of the trip should be by milk run freight train or over the washboard clay roads of rural Georgia. A telegram sent by sympathizers in New York had been left for them "general delivery" and then carried on board in Virginia. It warned them that another group was asking the same questions and tracking the old Rabbi's whereabouts. The decision to use a car and a truck had been made not because of speed; the train would have been faster even with stops at every twist in the rail line, but rather because it would allow them to enter town quietly and unnoticed.

The midnight requisitions of the two vehicles had been easy for the two short-straw drawers. While the others got a complete night's sleep in the Peachtree Street Hotel, they prowled a cross-town neighborhood until a modified milk truck and a practically new 1910 Buick Model 17 were safely hidden for the morning's departure. Two days later, the group waited for dark just outside the city limits of Moreau, Georgia. As they crept in groups of two into town, it was Vilna that first spied the Arabs in the shadows of the alley on Main Street. He and Yegor made a tactical retreat and pulled the group together in an alcove across from the Mercantile. Vilna thought it odd that the lights were still on in the back of the store given the late hour. The others were whispering excitedly about what to do with the Arabs, when a young woman exited the store followed a few minutes later by a portly distinguished looking man, the storekeeper apparently, since he locked the mercantile's door with a key. The young woman, they noted, only made it as far as the library. The merchant stood in the shadows and watched the young woman until she disappeared through the door.

Moreau, Georgia, USA - April 12, 1910

Sarah thought she had slipped into the synagogue's library unobserved. The key still fit the door, and despite an absence of over seven years, there was a familiarity about the long stacks of books, musty odors, and quiet stillness of the library. Her return to Moreau had been requested by Georgina, but the assignment had come as a shock. During the two days it had taken her to pack and for her to travel by train to South Georgia, Sarah's fears had grown. As she had prepared to leave New York, every item placed in her trunk had been measured in her mind against the standard of "what would Wilbur think." She was not the country girl that left Moreau seven years ago. He had never seen her in the fine clothes of New York society.

Would he still find her attractive? she asked herself.

Other questions flourished: She had never said good-bye. *Would he still want her?* He didn't know about her commitment to Georgina's work. *Would he still confide in her?*

There were no lights on in the library, only the rising moon's glow refracting through the stained glass of the main room's dome. Sarah's nerves were on edge. Seven years ago, she would not have been so jumpy; but then she was expected; now she was not. Back then, after leaving the store and taking her dinner at the boardinghouse, Sarah usually returned to the library. Most often, he waited for her and lighted the candles for her to read and study in an alcove hidden from street view. He helped her find the books she needed, stacking them neatly beside her chair. He sat and talked with her, sharing his day and his dreams, and then he would leave her to her books to go do his work, most often with a stolen kiss and a smile.

Throughout the nearly three years of this odd courtship, Sarah was never certain where he was in the library. He seemed to disappear; often she left without seeing him again that evening, always locking the door carefully behind her. Tonight he wasn't expecting her, but she hoped she could find him among the rooms and alcoves of the library and synagogue. She did not know how she would be received.

As she crept up the aisle towards the main chamber, Sarah thought she heard the sound of hammering. Tap – tap – thud. Tap – tap – thud. The rhythm was more discernable than the volume. In the dim light, she did not know what to do. Tap – tap – thud. The rhythm continued.

Finally she decided.

Her high heel shoes, New York fashion statements since the late 1800's, were not suited for the red clay streets of Moreau and hung often in the wooden sidewalk cracks. She had regretted her choice of wearing them earlier, but now she was able to mimic the sound on the wooden floors of the library with her heel. Tap – tap – tap, she responded, tap – tap – tap. The long heel that added several inches to her height was an effective tool. The sound below stopped.

Sarah heard the friction of the bookcase sliding in the adjacent alcove that released Wilbur from his hidden workshop, but the noise meant nothing to her. His voice did though. It was gruff, threatening, and like a cannon shot in the still hollowness of the cavernous room.

“How did you get in here?” he was using intimidation as a weapon.

Forty-eight hours of preparation and all she could manage was a squeak.

“Get out. You have no business here,” he growled menacingly. At the same time he raised a thick oak stick he had brought with him.

“Wait, Wilbur, it's me . . . Sarah,” she finally voiced in fear.

Her high-pitched feminine voice registered immediately in the Wilbur's brain, nullifying any threat he might have felt. He wasn't afraid of any woman, but it took a while for the meaning of the words to form the mental image of his lost love.

“I don't care who you are, you have no business . . .” his words trailed off.

Slowly he moved forward. The six or seven paces that parted them shrank. The rising moon seemed to increase its luminescence through the clerestory windows high above.

“Sarah?”

“Yes.”

“What . . . how . . . why?” the real conversation was going on in his head, but she knew the meaning of each stumbling word.

“Wilbur, I’ve missed you,” she said simply after all the words she had prepared in her head.

She smiled, he melted, and then he took her in his arms.

The dream ended with the front door glass breaking, a lock being forced, the sound of boots rushing across the floor. In seconds, six men in black surrounded the couple. The oaken stick was still in Wilbur’s hand, but because of his embrace, useless in its position behind her back.

None of the men had spoken. One of the dark figures stepped out of the ring of terror and pushed the young couple towards the back of the library. The movement separated Wilbur from Sarah enough that he could raise the wooden weapon he held, but before the stick could reach its zenith to strike, the slashing blow of a gun butt crashed against the base of Wilbur’s skull. His mistake in trying to defend his love left him unconscious at her feet and alone with their captors. Before his body could hit the floor, Sarah gasped in air to scream, but a large hand enveloped her mouth and strong arms pinned her against a muscled torso.

Two of the men grabbed the back of Wilbur’s shirt and dragged him in the direction away from the front of the library. Sarah was rudely carried behind as the other three men led the way looking for a place to carry out whatever deed they had in mind. The first words from any of the men were spoken by the shadow in the lead. Sarah assumed they were grunts of direction, but the words were unfamiliar, a foreign language she had not heard. Struggling in her captor’s arms, she heard the same phonetics hissed in her ear. She didn’t understand the words, but she understood the threats.

They dropped Wilbur near the very table where the couple had sat the first night ten years ago, and her burly maunder pushed Sarah into a seat. A candle was found and lighted. Four of the men went off in opposite directions, leaving her strongman and the one who had given directions. The candle flickered and Sarah saw the leader’s features clearly for the first time. A chill went through her. The Arabic features were grizzled and hard. Even in the soft light, the dark eyes surrounded by thick black eyebrows and high-bronzed cheekbones defined the face of a man intent on his purpose. He leaned down, his face close to hers.

“Where is it?” the voice was a raspy accented whisper.

“Where is what?” she replied with as much courage as she could muster.

He grabbed her hair and pulled, forcing her face up to within inches of his.

“*Sharmuta*, you can save your boyfriend a beating, if you tell us now.”

The derogatory Arabic word for ‘an unholy woman lacking virtue’ angered Sarah. She was not Arabic nor did she speak the language, but she had heard one of Georgina’s friends use the term to describe a pathetic looking woman on the street in New York. Innocently she had asked what the man meant. Her mentor had shushed her, but later explained when they were alone.

“How dare you . . .” Instinctively she rose to face her accuser, her forehead butting his nose. He reacted by roughly shoving her down. She bounced off the edge of the chair onto the floor, her skirts bunched up beneath her. He whirled away, bent over, and braced himself on one knee with one hand and held his throbbing nose with the other. Checking his fingers for his own blood, he rose to kick her, but chose instead to kick the still unconscious Wilbur. Sarah grabbed his leg before he could lash out at the limp man again. His burly companion reached down and grabbed her shoulders and lifted her with a plop back into the chair. Her dress was torn where his hands gripped her collarbone. His ham-like hands remained pinching her shoulders and fully prepared to shove her down into her seat if she attempted to rise again.

Wilbur groaned and started to roll over. The Arab’s leg cocked to kick the prostrate man again.

“Asad,” the brawny one holding Sarah whispered in warning. She realized it was the leader’s name said with reverence and fear.

Asad hesitated and refrained from striking Wilbur, rationalizing as his companion had hoped that nothing would be gained by harming the man at this moment.

“Let the girl be. Get him up and tie him to a chair,” Asad directed the bodyguard and threatened to wallop the supine form if the big man didn’t move quickly. Sarah started to stand.

He shoved the girl and she folded into a chair. When he leaned down, his hands resting on each of the arms of her seat, she thought he was going to try to kiss her and she turned her head aside to avoid him. His

breath was odorless she noticed unlike the man who had held her captive before.

“My name is Asad. It means ‘lion’ in Arabic. You will give us what we want or like the lion, I will tear you apart and eat you. Do you understand?” His voice seemed to mimic the growl one would expect from such a powerful animal.

“Yes,” Sarah replied simply, realizing that her best course of action was non-resistance and delay.

Wilbur was trying to hold his head up. It bobbed like a toy on a spring a few times, but gradually he was able to gain control of his body and become conscious of the situation.

“Where are the plans and writings of the old Rabbi?” Asad asked coldly.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Sarah replied.

The Arab leaned again into her face, this time making sure she couldn’t stand. “You know precisely what I mean. “

Before Sarah could protest again, Wilbur spoke. “She doesn’t know what you want. She lives in New York. I’m the one that has the rabbi’s documents. Leave her alone.”

“Good, you are ready to cooperate. Tell us where they are.”

“No,” Wilbur responded, bracing himself for physical punishment. Rabbi Ziegler had warned Wilbur during their years together that reconstructing the ark might cause a great concern to radical groups both Jew and Arab. The Jewish nation would not have their land fully restored until the ark was available to lead them as it had during Joshua’s and David’s times. Without the ark, the power balance rested with the enemies of Israel. The old rabbi had predicted that someday Arabic or heathen forces would try to stop what they were doing. Wilbur had always considered the old man’s concerns as nonsense.

Wilbur heard the staccato sound of an open hand on facial skin, but he felt no pain from the slap. Immediately he realized Sarah’s face was the target, not his. Straining on the ropes holding his hands behind him, he tried to lunge from the seat to protect the woman. Awkwardly, he teetered on two of the four legs; then both he and the chair fell over, landing sideways, still tied in place.

“You like the floor, my friend?” Asad laughed. Looking at his huge assistant, he nodded and the man in one motion hoisted Wilbur and the chair upright. Before any more questions could be asked, the four men who had split up to search the library, returned.

“Nothing, Asad,” the first man reported. “We found nothing that you described. There are no writings that detail plans to rebuild the Ark or any indication of any work toward that end.”

“That’s OK, my friend. This young man has already told me he knows where they are and he’s going to help us,” Asad turned back to Wilbur. “But if he refuses, you men may enjoy the fruits of a virgin tonight,” the wicked threat was clear.

“You’ll have to untie me so I can show you,” Wilbur said, his decision made quickly because he did not doubt the man’s intention to hurt Sarah if he did not comply.

“Release him,” Asad commanded unconcerned that Wilbur, though a well-built young man, would dare to use force or flee with six men surrounding him and his girlfriend.

The knots resisted the big guard’s thick fingers, but finally yielded. Wilbur stood gently, his side sore from the pounding of Asad’s foot, rubbing his wrists’ abrasions, the result of his strains against the rope. He had no plan, but he was pretty certain that giving them the old rabbi’s drawings and documents would not guarantee either Sarah’s safety or his. He started for the front door; an Arab henchman stepped into his path.

“Where are you going?” Asad asked.

“Wha’chu y’all want is up this way,” he replied unsure what his bluff would yield. If he got within sight of the front door, maybe he could draw someone’s attention on the street, although it was rare at this hour for anyone to tread the boardwalks lining the streets of downtown Moreau.

Asad leaned against the library table and propped one foot on the rung of the chair Sarah had been pushed into. To the five men who had accompanied him, he said, “Kill him if he tries to run.”

The five men surrounded Wilbur. The lieutenant of the group asked, “Which way?” in English, but his Arabic tongue made sounds like “whish woah?” Wilbur’s half-baked plan had not included the possibility of leaving Sarah alone with the dark-haired man. He realized the original bluff was flawed, but couldn’t think of any alternative. When he didn’t

respond immediately to the “whish woah?” question, the Arab shoved him toward the front door.

“Gets wha mar maser wanchs,” the man commanded, butchering the diction of nearly every word. Each of the men carried a handgun; most had the stylish new short-barreled revolver that was popular for its ability to be hidden under one’s clothes. The man brandished his.

“I’m not leaving you alone with her,” Wilbur declared, staring at Asad and ignoring the armed Arab.

“Barak,” the leader barked, stopping the man’s upraised arm as he prepared to pistol-whip Wilbur.

Snarling to Wilbur, “You will get the writings now or I will let my anxious friend take out his frustrations on the lady.”

“I know where it’s at,” Sarah interrupted realizing the crisis that was developing. Her Arab captor allowed her to stand up without challenge. Without waiting for her captor, she walked between the tables in the direction Wilbur had originally started. Asad stepped quickly to remain by the woman’s side. The phalanx around Wilbur moved behind the couple instinctively carrying him with them. Asad motioned them to stop as they approached the area near the front door. Sarah, not wishing to separate herself any further from Wilbur, turned into one of the stacks of books and began to pull volumes from the shelves at random. Her subterfuge held the attention of the guards as Wilbur estimated his chances of grabbing one of the guns. He never had a chance to carry out his plan.

The crash of glass sent slivers and shards sailing through the air and skittering across the polished wood floor for the second time that evening. Six black-hooded figures followed the shockwave, successfully surprising the five startled Arabs surrounding Wilbur. The English-butchering platoon leader fired one shot randomly before a knife flashed nearly decapitating him. The four others were taken out with equal efficiency, falling to either deadly knife wounds or skull crushing blows. The Arab’s shot had hardly ended its echo when the battle was over and Wilbur safely protected by one of the invaders.

Shaking loose from his savior, Wilbur ran to the row of shelves where he had last seen Asad and Sarah. They were gone.



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