

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

CHAPTER 1

Zurich, Switzerland

The woman sat bolt upright as if in school, her slender right wrist manacled to the armrest of a blond-wood, over-sized, high-backed chair secured to the floor, looking incredibly striking—but shocked, remote.

Sat wondering ...

Watching ...

Waiting, fearing the worst.

Alone.

Mouth soft and trembling, Laylah sat perched in the center of a single-room flat; it was dust-covered with half-eaten plates of food, piles of empty fast-food wrappers and pizza cartons that blanketed the floor. The only movement came from the whispery scuttling of cockroaches, crawling over the cracked and rust-stained porcelain of the kitchen sink. Strobelike flashes from a closed-circuit TV monitor's flickering screen pulsed and played across the woman's face.

Pressing a cigarette to her quivering lips with her free hand, Laylah took a deep drag and exhaled.

Terror-glazed eyes cut to the door. Counted the triple brass deadbolts. Darted to the window. Checked it was locked and covered with security screens.

Looking closely now, she gazed vacantly at the reflection in the windowpane.

Some would say that face with its flawless, sun-bronzed skin and cherubic good looks was perfect. Almost *too* perfect. The jaw set a bit too firm. The lips at times slightly cruel. The neck a bit too long, swanlike. The cold, piercing, powder-blue eyes, like a porcelain doll, held a certain sadness. A flatness. But sometimes they sparked. Became windows that revealed nerves that were like the frayed ends of two charged wires. Separated they held only the potential for violence. An offhand remark, an innocent bump and jostle on the train, might only draw a smile. Or the naked ends might

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

touch, releasing a current of rage. That's when she lost control.

Overhead, a moth trapped in the light fixture fluttered its wings in desperation.

Below, Laylah sat quaking. Her T-shirt drenched in sweat and outlining the mounds of her breasts, teeth clenched firmly and grinding.

Her eyes closed tightly now, she softly mumbled in a druggedlike stupor, "Don't sleep, can't sleep. Can't let them in." The cigarette held weakly between long fingers dropped to the floor.

The wall clock tick-tick-ticking as the dark minutes of the night wound down.

Each breath grew shallower, uneven.

She opened her eyes.

The mirrored face stared back, eyes probing. In her mind's eye she thought it whispered.

I am, therefore I Kill?

Footsteps sounded in the outer hallway ... drew closer—

Her eyelids snapped wide. Breath held tightly and ears straining, Laylah's tear-clouded gaze shot to the door, searching obsessively. *Still locked tight. Safe. Don't let them in!*

—and then paused briefly. A reaching shadow poured from beneath the door, shrunk away. The footfalls moved on and then gradually faded.

Caged breath exploded from her lungs. She breathed a sigh of relief.

The shrill ring of the telephone shattered the air.

It rang again. Stared back from the floor. Rang a third time.

Trembling hands fisted. Finally her free hand reached down and palmed the receiver.

For a moment, the caller breathed heavily, raggedly into the phone but said nothing. Then he spoke in a whispery yet forceful voice:

"Let's play a game—"

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

Eyes blinking twice in rapid succession, face sculpted by unseen hands, the killer squirmed through flesh and bone to the surface. Took control and said in a wooden tone ...

“I’m listening—”

“You have a new target. Kazim Rahman.”

“Rahman,” she repeated.

“Yes,” the voice rasped. “He’s patiently waiting for you at the Club-Q on Bergen Strasse in the Zone. Look at the monitor.”

Laylah’s eyes flicked to the monitor mounted on the wall. The image of a swarthy, Middle Eastern man with a pencil-thin mustache appeared on the screen.

Face blank, eyes opaque, she sat listening intently.

“Rahman will respond to the recognition code: I favor chess.”

“I favor chess.”

“He’ll be expecting you to make a trade, you won’t. Neutralize target and obtain document in his possession.”

Click.

The hum of the dial tone.

The steel wristband that cuffed her to the chair rolled back and disappeared flush into the armrest. With three loud clicks the electronic deadbolts unlocked in succession. A slight hissing sound and the outer door slowly swung inward.

Silhouetted in the doorway stood a figure. Cautiously, the figure advanced across the threshold and stopped. The extended arm proffered a suit bag. In a hushed whisper a voice said, “You’ll have to change. Do your make-up.”

* * *

A pounding Techno-Euro beat raged from the loudspeakers at the Club-Q. Strobe lights pulsed, revealing stuttering glimpses of purple neon, a black lacquered bar, and black faux-leather booths that ringed the jammed dance floor. The air was clotted with smoke, sweat, violence, and pheromones.

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

Rahman was at the bar, looking for a refill, and sweating profusely. The leather pants and jacket he'd chosen to wear didn't breathe like the sheer robes he was accustomed to wearing in his homeland, Saudi Arabia. His work had taken him to stranger places. His business was exchanging art and antiquities for death. He sold priceless, stolen ancient artifacts on the black market. The money received financed al-Qaeda's suicide squads. His most recent offering was the writings of the eighth-century Arabian sage and alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan, better known as Geber, which had been part of the booty from the recent looting of the Baghdad Museum.

A woman snaked her way through the crowd toward him. She moved with her shoulders back and her head lifted haughtily. She radiated self-confidence and vitality.

He noticed the reaction she had on every man in the club. Their sullen faces came alive and their eyes tracked her, but looked away as she passed, as if they somehow knew a single cutting glance from this woman could render them into eunuchs.

When the woman edged past a girl with lavender spiked hair and a black PVC outfit, the girl shot her a challenging stare, as if she was trying to decide if she craved her sexually or sadistically or both. Rahman thought that most of the patrons, like him, were seeking something that transcended sex and violence. The difference was that he'd experienced the power of having a woman's life-force, her essence, drain from her as he held her body close, gazing into her lifeless eyes.

The woman sidled up next to him at the bar.

She wasn't having any luck getting the bartender's attention. He hoisted a large euro note, and the bartender shot over and filled her order. A longneck bottle of Heineken. As he studied her face in profile, she turned. Her eyes were the same shade of blue as a flickering gas flame, but icy. Her gaze was direct, coolly sensual, slightly playful. Everything about her exuded a savage vitality. She was physical perfection. Glistening olive

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

skin. High cheekbones. Her lips were full, her mouth generous. Although dressed somewhat modestly, her silk blouse was unbuttoned just enough for him to sneak a peek at her cleavage. She flicked her tousled mane of raven, silken hair and smiled.

As she slid onto a barstool, his gaze lowered, drinking in her narrow waist, the long, supple lines of her legs, the way the straps of her spike-heeled pumps caressed her delicate ankles.

She took the beer and looked at him across the top of the bottle as she slowly brought it to her mouth, her lips parting as she might have welcomed his erection. He flashed a greasy smile and stroked his mustache. "I'll only be in town for just the night."

In a silken voice she said, "You don't like to play games, do you?"

She took another sip. He studied the way her throat muscles worked as she swallowed. Imagined a straight razor slicing across her soft flesh.

"Games?" he asked.

"I favor chess."

The reference to chess didn't go unnoticed. *So this is my contact for the exchange*, he thought. *Rahman, He who is great has sent you a gift*. Absently, his hand patted his chest, assuring himself the manuscript was still nestled safely in the lining of his jacket.

She ran her tongue along her upper lip, slowly for effect, and winked.

He reached out and cupped the firm mound of her buttocks. She moaned, slid off the stool and pressed against him, her eyes fluttering. *She's so smug, so vain, and so full of herself*. He imagined neatly slicing into each eye socket, reversing those arctic orbs so that they looked inward. Condemned for eternity to gaze upon herself.

She leaned in close, her breath hot on his face, her eyes never wavering, effectively blocking their intimacy from curious patrons on either side. Her hand moved upward and she tried to reach inside his jacket. He

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

pushed it away. “Not so fast,” he admonished. “We’ll make the exchange outside in my car.”

“Okay,” she said from between pouting lips. “But let me give you a preview.”

That’s when he felt it. Her hand sliding up his inner thigh. He flinched. She laughed as her hand rose higher, her eyes still locked on his. Her practiced hand undid his zipper, reached inside. His heart pounded in his ribcage.

She whispered into his ear, “Do you like it rough?” and bit his earlobe. He winced.

A bolt of sharp, stabbing pain shot from his groin, traveling down his thigh like molten lava. Her expression changed from smoldering arousal to apathetic disdain in an instant, and she said, “Checkmate!” Then nuzzling his ear with the tip of her nose she explained, “That burning sensation rippling through your body right now... is a deadly neurotoxin.” And then she kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Rahman saw her face begin to darken, then the room around him began to spin, slowly at first, then at a sickening speed. He heard snatches of music, muted voices, sounds that slowly faded, became weaker and distant. He rasped for air and slumped forward. With a swift pull, Laylah hiked his zipper, and deftly tucked the syringe she’d palmed earlier back into the clutch purse that hung at her side. She moved with the precision and stealth of a stage magician.

With a flick of her wrist a razor-edged knife filled her hand. She glanced around and simultaneously reached beneath his jacket while continuing to nuzzle his ear. In one silken movement the blade sliced the jacket’s lining, and she removed the document. She tucked it beneath her skirt, snugly between garter and thigh. The music raged on, the crowd so self-absorbed that no one noticed as she slipped into the press of bodies and into the night.

CHAPTER 2

**And they (the Jews) said (in boast),
"We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary,
the Messenger of God":
But they killed him not, nor crucified him,
but it was made to appear to them so,
and those who differ therein are full of
doubts
with no (certain) knowledge,
but they follow only conjecture.
For a surety they (Jews) killed him not.**

Holy Qur'an

4:157

Dome of the Rock: Al-Quds, Palestine

Overhead, Israeli fighter jets streaked against the afternoon sky.

The tall man stopped to listen to the tour guide addressing a group of American sightseers.

“Construction of the Dome began around 688 C.E. by Caliph Abd al-Malik. The Prophet Muhammad’s mystic night journey, atop a winged stallion with the Archangel Gabriel at his side, brought him here, where he prayed with the great prophets: Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Then he ascended to paradise and to Allah on a golden ladder.”

A heavyset woman with a floppy, wide-brimmed hat shook her wattle of double chins and said, “Sure... but tell us about those secret chambers.”

“The Mount is actually riddled with tunnels and passages, chambers and caves, deep wells and cisterns,”

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

the guide went on. "There are thirty-eight major documented wells and cisterns, eleven minor cisterns and forty-three catalogued conduits and passageways. The most famous of which are Solomon's stables and a couple of other large chambers."

A skinny young man asked, "Isn't that where the Knights Templar searched for lost treasure?"

The guide nodded and smiled.

"Ah, I see. You want the magical mystery tour. As you wish. In about 1118, nine warrior monks traveled from France to Jerusalem. Their avowed mission was to protect Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. But legend states that they had a secret agenda: the excavation of the mount in a search for buried treasure and relics."

"Did they find it?" another asked.

"They found something all right," the guide explained. "When they returned to France, they received a hero's welcome. St. Bernard of Clairvaux gave a powerful sermon that resulted in the expansion of their order, a religious order of warriors who only reported to the Pope. The sons of rich European nobles swelled their ranks, pledging their wealth. Eventually their Temple became Europe's first bank, even loaning money to monarchs."

"Isn't that what got them into hot water?" the woman asked knowingly.

"More like hot flames. Yes, the bad luck associated with Friday the thirteenth all started with the arrest of the French Knights by Philip the Fair on Friday the 13th of October, 1307. Many were burned at the stake based on false accusations of sacrilegious acts either involving the Crucifix or on an image of Christ."

"Didn't they worship some sort of mysterious silver head?" the young man said, his eyes probing.

"Who knows?" The guide shrugged. "All their admissions were made under the pain of torture. The Dominicans, the Hounds of the Lord, were the French Inquisition's master torturers. The Templars were

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

spread-eagled and had lead weights stacked on their chest, or had funnels rammed into their mouths and were filled with water until they bloated and suffocated. If that didn't make them confess, their feet were burnt, then they had wedges driven under their fingernails or had their teeth pulled out, the nerve endings deftly probed with sharp instruments."

"You mean like in that movie *Marathon Man*, when Olivier, the Nazi dentist, keeps asking Dustin Hoffman, 'Is it safe?' as he digs into another cavity?" the young man offered.

"Where do you think the writer William Goldman got the idea?" the guide said.

The woman's face blanched. "But why did they attack them?"

"Oldest reason in the world, money. King Philip was into the Templars for a fortune in loans; he even borrowed money for his daughter's dowry from the Templars. They were a lot of other monarchs all across Europe deeply in debt to the holy warrior monks."

"But they were accused of heresy," a man wearing a nametag identifying him as a Baptist minister admonished in a self-satisfied tone, his jaw jutting, eyes squinting in the harsh sunlight.

From the rear of the group came a voice. It was deep and precise and conveyed intelligence. "Perhaps you should look up the meaning of the word." The crowd parted and heads turned as a tall man of aristocratic bearing strode to the front. "Heresy is from a Greek word, *airesis*, signifying a choice, the opinion chosen, and the sect holding the opinion." His cold, dark eyes studied the crowd. "It was a label used to describe early Christian sects. St. Paul was described to the Roman governor Felix as the leader of the heresy of the Nazarenes. The historian Josephus applied the name to the three religious sects prevalent in Judea: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes."

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

“But Christ was an Essene,” the woman managed around a mouthful of candy bar, clutching her over-sized hat.

The tall man smiled thinly and moved on, leaving them staring in awe-shocked silence as he made his way into the Dome.

Another man, dressed in dark western clothing, except a white-and-black checkered *gutra* double-banded with a black *igal* that covered his head, pushed his way through the knot of people. He followed the tall stranger at what appeared to be a calculated distance, his eyes nervously darting around as he moved.

Recovering quickly and trying to save face, the guide said, “I won’t be able to show you, but beneath the *as-Shakra*, an ancient sacred stone believed to be part of the original wall of Solomon’s Temple, is a cavelike crypt known as *Bir el- Arweh*, the Well of Souls. Here, according to ancient folklore, the voices of the dead may sometimes be heard along with the sounds of the rivers of paradise.

“Rumor has it that archeologists are quietly exploring the elaborate honeycomb of subterranean tunnels, cisterns, and secret passages under the Temple Mount.”

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

NSA Fort Meade, Maryland

Kenny, the scrawny, carrot-top intern, pounded the keyboard, instructing the mainframe to access the “Patsy” cut-out system. It was a software program that disguised the source of various computer searches and data mining conducted by the NSA. If any congressional committee or rival agency like Langley or the FBI ran a back trace, the trail would point to the NSC. And no one inside the beltway wanted to lock horns with the bull-necked chairman of the NSC.

The intern was running a crosscheck on the FBI's Combined DNA Index System or—CODIS for short: a database of DNA markers compiled from convicted felons, runaway kids, victims of UNSUB serial killers, or known and suspected terrorists. Kenny took a hit from a can of Coke and brought a bag of chips to his mouth. Tilting it, he devoured the last few crumbs. He'd been working for Dr. Sanger, a ranking genetics egghead, for six months now, and he'd run this program without fail for the umpteenth time, always with the same result: NO MATCH FOUND. Hell, Dr. Sanger didn't even confide in him the identity or history of the base DNA marker that he'd been trying to match.

Data streamed across the face of the oversized monitor.

He glanced at the wall clock. Midnight. He sighed.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the flash of the amber light.

His gaze cut back to the screen. In bold letters the words—POSITIVE MATCH MADE. NOTIFICATION TO MESSIAH PROJECT DIRECTOR COMPLETED. EYES ONLY—pulsed in red.

Kenny's main talent was computer hacking, and he resented doing this grunt work as he called it. But even more, he resented being kept in the dark. “Screw it,” he said as he rubbed his hands together quickly and blew on them before letting his fingers fly over the keys. He'd figured out Dr. Sanger's password months ago. Stupid shit for brains had used his golden lab's name: Old

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

Yeller. *How f'ing original*, Kenny thought. Determined to find out what the hell the professor was up to, Kenny hacked his way in and called up the detailed results.

Ice carved dominos tumbled down his spine as he read the screen:

99% probability match of terrorist subject with base DNA marker from Shroud of Turin sample.

He sat frozen, speechless. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard the hiss of the security door as it opened behind him. He heard the fall of footsteps drawing closer.

He sensed someone standing directly behind him. The familiar scent of Dr. Sanger's aftershave wafted around him. He knew that Sanger had no life, usually slept on the old leather couch in his office upstairs.

Without turning he said, "Hey Doc ... I've done it. We've gotta match."

Then it hit him. He'd violated security protocols by accessing the results. His hand flew to the keyboard.

Before he could delete the screen, he felt it. An odd sensation, something cold ... metallic pressed against his throat. Tighter and tighter it constricted, cutting off his air supply, razoring into tender flesh.

Instinctively, he clawed at the piano wire looped around his neck.

Dark motes swarmed at the corners of his vision.

His fingers became slick with blood.

His legs kicked spasmodically. He writhed and twisted his torso but an overpowering force was yanking him backward out of the chair now. A starburst of light flashed on the screen of his eyelids, dizziness and then ... blackness everywhere.

An arthritic-bunched hand reached across Kenny's limp and lifeless body and hit the Ctrl, Alt, and Delete keys simultaneously.

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

CHAPTER 3

Palestine

DR. FAISAL BIN AL-SALADIN stumbled, cursed under his breath, and turned to the man behind him.

“Be careful, it gets a bit steep here,” he said, smiling weakly, holding an outstretched hand toward the tall Italian. He had to swallow his annoyance, his irritation at being here at all. He had urgent work to do back in Riyadh at the university, and not much time to accomplish it. He’d wanted no part of this assignment, but Bin Laden had insisted, saying Faisal was the only man he could trust for this sacred mission.

It is not your place to question the will of Allah, Faisal, Bin Laden had said. If He commands us to lay with the whores of Rome to achieve a higher purpose, then so be it. Deliver the artifact into their hands.

“How much farther is it?” the Italian asked.

“Not much farther. We’re entering the burial chamber now.”

Faisal arced the lamp high, playing the light across the loculi—long, narrow shafts hewn deep into the walls of the chamber to serve as burial niches, some for whole bodies, others for limestone ossuaries that held the brittle bones of an entire family.

“The generator isn’t working or we’d have plenty of light.”

“All the more melodramatic this way, isn’t it? I feel like Carter just as he was about to enter Tutankhamun’s tomb. I hope there’s no curse,” the Italian said, his voice cracking slightly.

“Have no fear, for He who is great shall protect us from harm.” As the overwhelming stillness and closeness of the underground crypt blanketed him, Faisal secretly hoped that his words were true.

They were deep beneath the *as-Shakra* now, The Noble Rock, the focus of the interior of the Dome of the

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

Rock, located directly beneath the lofty golden dome and surrounded by the highly ornate inner circular and outer eight arcades. The mosque itself was octagonal in shape, each side having a door and seven windows, with rock crystal carving. The dome was made of gold. Muslims believed that this was the rock upon which the Prophet Muhammad stood, before he was raised to heaven. And in his heart Faisal knew that this work would insure that he, too, would see paradise.

The air was damp and chill. The rock walls that ensconced them wept with moisture.

The Italian, known simply as the Cleric, was tall and barrel-chested but moved with an economy of grace like an Olympic athlete. He had a presence that dominated the chamber, filling it, not by his mere bulk but by the simple fact that he was there.

When the Cleric had heard of the discovery of a fragment of the scrolls, he had been simultaneously awed and frightened. *The Book of Q* had been, up until now, only the conjecture of biblical scholars. The similarity of the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, and Luke all pointed to a much older source, a *Quelle* in German, hence the lost book of *Q*. And when he heard of their contents and the bodies, his heart seized. The pangs of guilt he'd initially felt as a high-ranking Roman Catholic cleric, who'd taken a holy vow to maintain the integrity of doctrinal truths at all costs, were soon replaced by the raw intensity of power these artifacts held. He knew they held the power to quake the very foundations of The Holy Church and Christianity everywhere.

"Is this where you found the bones of the man you believe was crucified? The ones you sent us for examination?" the Cleric asked.

Faisal shook his head. "No, we must continue south through this passage to an area beneath the *El Kas* Fountain. The fountain is located approximately midway between the Dome of the Rock and *Al Aqsa* Mosque."

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

They continued on, their footsteps echoing in the darkness, the Cleric's broad girth forcing him to turn sideways, squeezing through narrower sections.

Finally they stopped. The Cleric found himself standing in the center of the mirror image of the Dome above. The chamber was an octagonal space from which eight loculi radiated.

"Over here," Faisal said, hoisting the hurricane lamp and illuminating a shaft to his left. "The bones were in an ossuary."

The Italian remembered studying the bones. The heels were pierced by a long nail; the shattered insteps, victims of a hammer's heavy blow delivered on the Mount of Golgotha.

Faisal raised the lamp and it flickered. Shadows leaped and danced across the walls.

"Was there a name on the jar?" the Italian asked.

Faisal turned, swallowed audibly. "Yes ... in Aramaic. 'J'acov, my brother, who died in my place.'"

A wry smile crept across the Italian's face. He fumbled in his pocket for a small, high-intensity flashlight and flicked it on. Its beam slowly arced across the wall above the crypt. There, etched into stone, were a series of murals. The first depicted a man accepting the burden of a cross. The second showed three figures looking down from a hilltop at the scene of the crucifixion. Beneath the man who bore a halo was the name *Issa al-Nagar*, and beneath the man at his side, the name *St. John* was written in Aramaic, Coptic, and Greek.

Panning the light back toward the third figure, he noticed that the face had soft, feminine features and her left hand held the hand of the haloed figure next to her. The Italian read the name aloud, "Magdalena, *Pistis Sophia*."

Mouth dry and heart pounding, the Cleric focused on the third panel. Entwined in and around the limbs of a tree that resembled a cross, a serpent peered back. The serpent had the head of a woman, cherubic but definitely

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

feminine. Above it a white dove pointed downward. The naked figures of a man and woman, Adam and Eve, bracketed the tree. The man pointed to the picture of an empty tomb. The woman pointed toward the east, to a cityscape. Letters that floated above it read Nin igi *nagar sir*.

“What does it mean?” the Cleric said, pointing to the inscription. “I don’t recognize the language.”

Fiasal stroked his chin. “That’s because it’s ancient Babylonian. Its use doesn’t fit with the other inscriptions.”

“Well . . . can you translate it or not?”

“It means ‘Great Architect of Heaven.’”

The Cleric scoffed. “These drawings look similar to Gnostic symbolism from the second century. And the Great Architect is a reference to the Masonic God. So far, you’ve shown me nothing of any consequence. I also suspect this whole mural may be a forgery.” He stared evenly, maintaining his poker-faced bluff. But when he panned the light across the top of the third mural, something caught his eye. Obscured by a layer of dust, a faint outline was barely visible.

“Faisal,” he said, tapping his shoulder. “See that faint tint of red near the top?”

Squinting and raising his lantern, Faisal grunted.

“Yes, beneath the dust.”

The Cleric looked more closely. “No, it’s almost as if someone has deliberately covered it over with chalk.”

After quickly searching the immediate area, Faisal found a crate, placed it beneath the mural, and gingerly climbed on top. The wood looked old and creaked as Faisal shifted his weight.

“It’s chalk all right.”

While Faisal began dusting the mural with a brush, the Cleric stood watching.

Faisal may already know too much, the Cleric reasoned. The Cleric knew the true meaning of the imagery of the serpent and the temptation in the Garden of Eden.

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

His mind wound back to lectures he'd heard while studying at Rome University, based upon the work of Joseph Campbell, the American authority on the origins of myth and its relationship to religion.

Professore Lorenzo had shown the class a slide titled *The Tree of Eternal Life*. “This is from a document in the ‘Ring of Nestor,’ an actual ring of solid gold found by a peasant boy in a huge beehive tomb. It’s of Minoan Crete origin dating from about 1550 to 1500 B.C.E.” He flicked the controller. “Look at this painting by Michelangelo. Some have criticized it because the serpent bears the head and curvaceous torso of a woman, then tapers into a snake’s body. But maybe the old Master was simply hiding the truth in plain sight. In this case, the ceiling of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel.”



A student asked, “So you’re saying that the story told in Genesis was borrowed from much earlier beliefs?”

“Indeed.”

“And that a serpent goddess ruled over mankind?”

“No, just the opposite: liberated mankind,” Lorenzo explained. “The Gnostics believe that the true God sent into the world a savior, a redeemer, not only once—but twice. The first time was in the Garden of Eden, where the serpent, previously the symbol of wisdom and self-moving energy, who was later transformed by patriarchal writers into Satan, gave Adam and Eve free will. Eve symbolized the divine Sophia, the female aspect of God, not a lust-filled temptress. Sophia mystically entered the serpent, who became the

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

instructor and taught Adam and Eve about their source, informing them that they were of high and holy origin and not mere slaves of the creator deity—Jehovah.”

“Sounds like they turned the story upside-down,” another student offered.

Lorenzo shrugged. “We could say the same for the Israelites who demonized the gods of the Canaanites, and then later, the Catholic Church followed suit, erecting churches upon old, so-called pagan temples and adopting their holidays.”

“Like Passover and Easter are celebrated on the date of the resurrection of Adonis,” a girl said. “And how the death, descent, and resurrection were also attributed to previous gods like Adonis, Mithris, Dionysis, and then finally Christ?”

“Or how the rabbit and egg, symbols of fertility, became the Easter Bunny and the egg hunt,” a second student offered.

Lorenzo nodded. “Cultures adopt each other’s mythos. Make demons of their gods.”

“And their women,” someone wisecracked.

“Genesis Chapter One states that God created *adam* in his own image. The word *adam* is correctly translated as humankind, the species, not solely the male. So the Gnostics believe that since Adam and Eve were created together, in His image, then God must have not been only male but androgynous. Beyond gender. Therefore, why shouldn’t God be worshiped as both male and female?”

The room was silent. Then from the back a girl shouted, “It’s about time someone told the truth.”

“So originally we were kind of a freak, half man and half woman?” a boy asked.

Lorenzo shook his head. “The word you’re searching for is hermaphrodite, divide it into two parts and you get—”

The same girl broke in. “Hermes and Aphrodite?”

Lorenzo nodded. “As Jung said, meld our two natures and be whole again.”

SOLOMON' KEY: THE CODIS PROJECT

The silence of the classroom was broken by the bell.

Finished with his work, Faisal stepped down and faced the Cleric.

“My friend, you seem lost in thought,” Faisal said, jolting him out of his reverie.

“I’m sorry ... what were you saying?”

Faisal shook his head. “Your suggestion that this is somehow a fake wounds my heart. If nothing else, I take great pains with my research. I think you’ll find the results of the carbon dating and chlorine isotope tests most interesting. I took scrapings of the images.”

“And?”

“It predates the Gospels, making it—”

“From the actual time that Christ walked the earth, a firsthand account.” The Italian drew a sharp breath.

“Exactly. I’ve managed to remove most of the chalk.” Faisal hoisted his lantern.

The Cleric’s eyes cut to the image above the dove that perched nestled in the clouds. A red-ochre-faced demon stared down scowling, and its hand pointed directly behind him. He recognized the face. It was *Asmodeus*, the demon Solomon used to build his temple. From nowhere a cold draft bit at the back of his neck.

Instinctively, he spun and probed the darkness with the flashlight’s narrow beam, eyes searching, hand shaking.

High above them, after flashing a permit issued by the Muslim Supreme Council—*Waqf*—at the guard dressed in the drab, olive-green uniform of the security forces, the man who’d followed the Cleric into the Dome made his way down the steps into the Well of Souls.

Absently, his hand ran over his outer clothing, checking that the explosives hidden beneath were still securely taped around his chest. Holding a maglite in one hand and black-light stick in the other, the intruder entered the mouth of the excavated tunnel. As he made his way through the winding passageway, he aimed the

R. DOUGLAS WEBER

light stick toward the ground. Like a trail of
breadcrumbs, the phosphorescent glow of the powder
that had been intermittently sprinkled marked the way.

Copyright©by rdweber all rights reserved
WGA Intellectual Property Registration Number:
1112971