

Lever Templar

A Castellum One Novel

Matt Gianni

LEVER
TEMPLAR

A CASTELLUM ONE NOVEL

MATT GIANNI

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For my parents

“What is history but a fable agreed upon?”

—Napoleon Bonaparte

CHARACTERS, 14th CENTURY – IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

(Underline denotes historical figure)

Brimley Hastings: English Templar sergeant.

Malcolm of Basingstoke: English Templar knight.

Angus: Scottish Templar squire.

William of Egendon: English Templar knight.

Pietro Bucci: Genoese shipping merchant. Captain of the *Filomena*.

William of Ockham: English Franciscan friar.

Marco Polo: Venetian merchant traveler and author.

Ghazi: Disfigured mamluk warrior. Malcolm's nemesis from Acre.

Henry II de Lusignan: King of Jerusalem and Cyprus (in exile).

Amalric de Lusignan: Prince of Tyre (in exile). Regent of Cyprus.

Francesco Orsini: Cardinal from Rome. Circutor Consistory leader.

Muhammad III: Sultan of Granada.

Ferdinand IV: King of Castile.

Edward I: King of England.

Boniface VIII: 193rd pope, formerly Benedetto Caetani.

Clement V: 195th pope, formerly Raymond Bertrand de Got.

Philip IV: King of France.

Shayla Kostas: Greek Cypriot apprentice tanner.

Theron Kostas: Greek Cypriot tanner. Templar tack master.

Guillaume de Nogaret: Keeper of the Seal of King Philip IV.

Jacques de Molay: French Templar knight and Grand Master.

Cibalik Darcan: Ambassador to Pope Clement V from Armenia.

**CHARACTERS, 14th CENTURY – IN ORDER OF
APPEARANCE (CONTINUED)**
(Underline denotes historical figure)

Benedict XI: 194th pope, formerly Nicola Boccasini.

Ayme d’Oselier: French Templar knight and Marshal of Cyprus.

Foulques de Villaret: French Hospitaller knight and Grand Master.

Jean de Villa: French Templar sergeant and Draper of Cyprus.

Farah Zayn: Syrian apprentice tanner.

Dabir Zayn: Syrian tanner.

Enzo Fausto: Pisan shipping merchant. Captain of the *Rosabella*.

Landolfo Brancaccio: Cardinal from Naples.

Bartholomew of Gordo: French Templar knight.

Hayton of Corycus: Armenian Cilician monk. Lord of Corycus.

Edward II: King of England.

Hugues de Pairaud: French Templar knight. Visitor of the Temple.

Balian of Ibelin: Prince of Galilee (in exile) and Cypriot nobleman.

An-Nasir Muhammad: Sultan of Egypt and Syria.

Leonardo Patrasso: Cardinal from Alatri.

Rifat Kanaan: Syrian fishmonger and former farmer.

Amira Kanaan: Wife of Rifat.

Yaghoob: Infant son of Rifat and Amira Kannan.

Walid: Syrian fishmonger.

Gentile Portino da Montefiore: Cardinal from Fermo.

Abdullah al-Rasheed: Syrian province Minister of Agriculture.

Malcolm: Infant son of Shayla and Brimley Hastings.

**CHARACTERS, 14th CENTURY – IN ORDER OF
APPEARANCE (CONTINUED)**
(Underline denotes historical figure)

Giovanni da Morrovalle: Cardinal from Morrovalle.

Carlo Petri: Senior Anconian chancery scribe stationed at Acre.

Tankiz an-Nasiri: Viceroy of Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad.

Nicholas III: 188th pope, formerly Giovanni Gaetano Orsini.

Mahmud Ghazan: 7th ruler of the Mongol Ilkhanate.

Oljaitu Khan: 8th ruler of the Mongol Ilkhanate.

Dante Alighieri: Florentine poet, statesman, and political theorist.

CHARACTERS, PRESENT DAY – IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Rick Lambert: American agent with Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MOI).

Samir Moozarmi: Iraqi agent with Iraqi MOI.

Zephyros Topolis: Greek priest of the Christian Church of Kanisah.

Danny Dicarpio: Professor of American history.

James Dougherty: Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) head.

Ali Kassab: Iraqi chief of the Iraqi MOI Investigations Unit (IU).

Giuseppe Plenducci: Italian priest and Vatican researcher.

Dominic Batista: Spanish cardinal. Vatican Secret Archives prefect.

Mohammed Moozarmi: Iraqi physician and congressman.

Yashira Moozarmi: Iraqi physician.

Maria Anna Belloci: Italian Gendarmerie Corps lieutenant.

Sean and Patrick Duffy: Irish-American twins. US Army sergeants.

Ahmed Makarem: Iranian commander of the Faregh Alethesalan.

Jahangir Nasser Rudahmi: Iranian founder of the Faregh Alethesalan.

Gerald Burggraf: Iran Desk, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Omar Volkan: Turk fisherman and deep-cover CIA transporter.

Farouk: Iranian commander of the Faregh Alethesalan.

Abu: Syrian teen at the Arwad fuel dock.

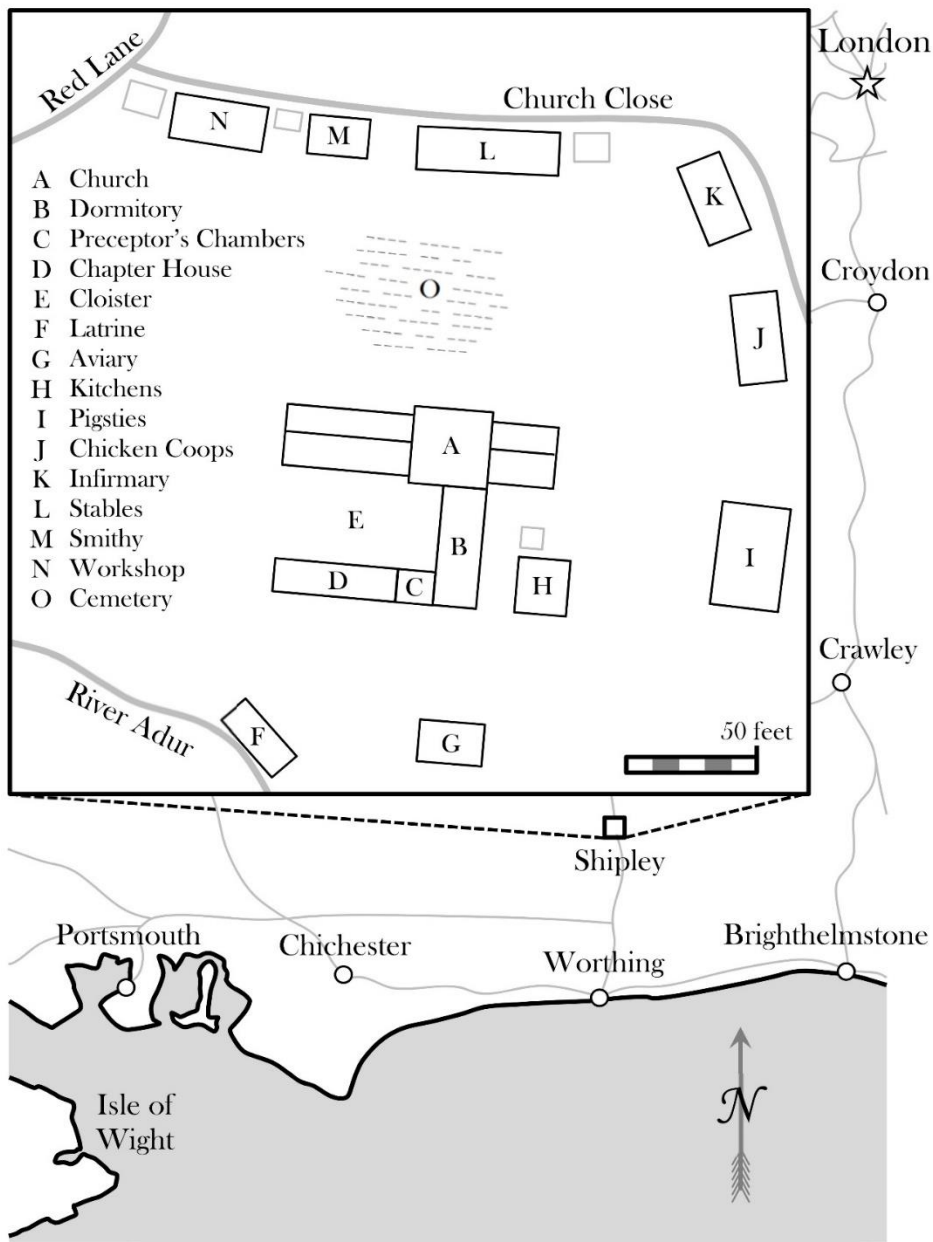
Mahmood: Syrian harbormaster and customs officer on Arwad.

Raja Kichlu: Sunni imam and curator of the Roza Bal shrine.

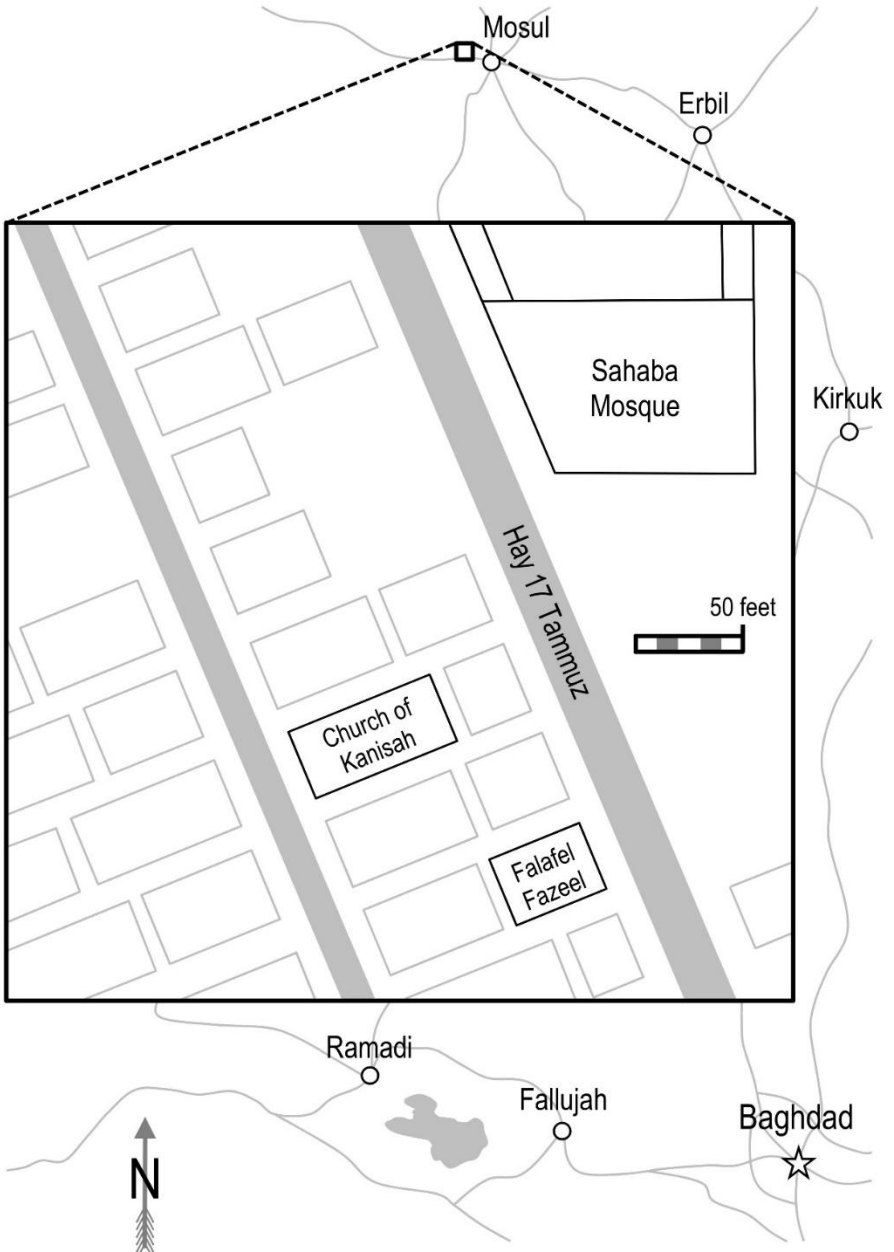
PART ONE

Militia Dei

Shipley Preceptory - 1307



East Kanisah – Present Day



CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 14, 1307

SHIPLEY, ENGLAND

Of the oaths sworn to the order, Brim Hastings knew it was his obedience being tested. His poverty had always been transparent given the enormous communal resources of the order, and his chastity had yet to be seen as a sacrifice, given his mostly cloistered seventeen years of life. But obedience? This he found difficult. Nevertheless, he nervously followed his mentor, Malcolm of Basingstoke, through the narthex of Shipley Church. Angus, the knight's squat and brutish squire, led the way.

The three crept along the darkened north aisle. Brim flinched upon hearing a gasp ahead. Malcolm calmly guided Angus toward the pews to the right with his right hand on the squire's left shoulder. The knight then addressed the figure in front of them. "Continue."

The wide-eyed novice monk with the tonsured head had been relighting candles placed in alcoves along the wall in preparation for the midnight liturgical service of matins. Brim knew this monotonous task well, having used a similar brass candlelighter himself on many nights after being admitted to the London preceptory eight years earlier.

Frustration welled up through the tension as Brim, once again, had to follow orders without having full knowledge of events. The accumulating questions in his mind had been gnawing at him since their hurried ride from London the day before. He surmised something was to be stolen from Shipley. Otherwise, Malcolm would have announced his arrival to Preceptor William of Egendon, who'd likely appreciate hearing of Cyprus from the Preceptor of Kolossi.

What troubled him most, however, was Angus the Scot acting with such drive, as though he knew of their purpose. Why did Malcolm

continue to place such trust in a man from a country led by an excommunicate? Despite his years of service with Malcolm on Cyprus, Angus, and others of Scottish descent, should have been expelled from the order after the pope excommunicated Robert the Bruce from the one true faith. Otherwise, how could those in the Order of the Temple of Solomon continue as the elite of Christendom?

Brim felt relief from the summer night's heat as the trio descended the stone steps curving under the north transept. Their flickering shadows, thrown by the large beeswax candle Angus had grabbed from the nave above, projected the illusion of movement onto darkened walls. Dirt he felt underfoot replaced the cleanliness of the nave above.

The smell of mildew intensified as they reached the damp lower level. They turned one last corner and approached an iron door. Angus plunged the candle onto the tine of a wall-mounted candleholder. The knight and the Scot removed their brown woolen riding cloaks tucked into the backs of their belts.

Brim followed their lead, his chest tightening. Donning the cloaks concealed their uniformed mantles—Malcolm's being white, the other two black, and all three displaying the distinctive symbol of their order: the *croix pattée rouge*, or red-footed cross.

Angus angled his head, as if to listen, while inching toward the door. Brim saw the outward-opening door was ajar and heard the sound distracting the middle-aged squire—a repeating pattern of shuffling feet followed by a dull thud. Angus revealed a smile of darkened teeth, held up his right hand, then paused for a moment before drawing his sword. It was a short sword, a favored weapon of the Highland clans.

Trust in Sir Malcolm, Brim told himself, though the words did little to stop his hands from shaking.

After the next thud, the squire pulled the door open just wide enough for his girth and led with his blade. "Hold where you stand."

"What . . . ?" a voice called out.

The clipped question went unanswered as Malcolm and Brim entered the small foyer, Malcolm with a palm on the pommel of his broadsword and Brim with his Roman gladius drawn. The guard flattened himself against the left wall. Against the right wall ten feet away lay an upturned

table with a dagger stuck in the center of a cluster of indentations. Two large candles in shielded brass carriers, likely meant for the upturned tabletop, burned on the floor nearby.

Malcolm held out a length of twine he'd pulled from his cloak pocket. "Secure him."

Angus scowled and turned his blade toward the room's only chair. The guard sat.

Brim sheathed his sword, tried to slow his breathing, and tied the guard's wrists to the chair back's lower rail.

The bound man seemed fixated on Malcolm, as many often were. "Who are you?"

The elder knight stood a head taller than the others. His cropped hair, beard, and mustache were all nearly white, but it was his piercing blue eyes that made his look mesmerizing. The motions of others alternated between pauses and jolts, but Malcolm seemed to move with effortless grace, pulling the iron door closed, ignoring the guard's repeated questions, and turning to Brim.

"Retrieve the vault key."

Brim noticed a thin leather strap around the nape of the guard's neck. Pulling it up produced a large key under the guard's chin. Malcolm gestured to Angus to watch the guard and for Brim to join him at the end of the twenty-foot-long foyer, at a vault door made of heavy iron bars.

He knew the chests of coinage would be gone. His work in the London scriptorium keeping the order's ledgers included logging the recent transfer of funds from all English preceptories. But surely Malcolm, a knight of Latin Rule who'd forsaken worldly wealth, was not interested in silver pennies and gold bezants. He could see through the bars before using the key to open the door—the contents of the vault had indeed been depleted. Only a small collection of uniforms, chain mail, and broadswords remained.

Malcolm entered, stood in the middle of the ten-foot-square vault, gestured toward the nearest broadsword, and looked down. "Breach the stone here."

The knight backed two steps away. Brim grabbed the sword from the rack and positioned the tip on the one-foot-square center floor tile. After sheepishly glancing once more at his mentor and receiving a nod, he grasped the hilt with both hands and began slamming the tip of the heavy blade into stone. Pieces of tile cracked apart and fell away out of view. He assumed the stone floor had been installed over solid ground. There now appeared to be a cavity beneath. He continued chipping away at the stone tile from the center outward.

“Tend to your charge!”

Brim jumped, nearly dropping the broadsword. Malcolm pointed at Angus. Outside the bars, the thickset Scot had crept closer, trying to gain a better view of activity inside the vault, neglecting his watch over the bound guard.

Angus wore a disgruntled expression but resumed his position near the foyer’s entrance. Brim felt a small measure of satisfaction upon realizing the Scot was in a similar state of ignorance as to their mission.

The center tile soon disappeared. Malcolm took the broadsword. “Enough. Retrieve the contents.”

On his knees, he felt something smooth two feet below, positioned in the hole diagonally. He had trouble getting a grip on whatever it was.

“By the straps,” said his mentor.

Finally, Brim curled fingers under leather strands and pulled out a dark leather satchel. At just under a foot square and about four inches thick, it appeared to be covered with dried grease or animal fat. He’d seen this kind of satchel before during his scriptorium duty—it was one way parchments were prepared for long-term storage.

Brim drew a startled breath after hearing a sharp crack from the foyer. Both he and Malcolm swiveled their heads.

The guard had apparently wiggled out of the twine threads binding his wrists to the chair. His bolting for the door had caused the chair to fall backward onto the stone floor, alerting Angus, who’d again been distracted by activity in the vault. The guard pushed on the heavy door.

Brim held back a scream as Angus plunged his Highland blade deep into the guard’s back.

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“No!” Malcolm rushed from the vault. “None of our brothers were to be harmed.”

Sinking to the floor and rolling onto his side to stare up at the knight, the guard’s last word conveyed his astonishment. “Brothers?”

CHAPTER 2

JULY 20, 12:08 P.M. GULF STANDARD TIME (GST)

NORTHERN MOSUL, IRAQ

Rick Lambert had gotten used to his partner rolling his eyes. He knew Samir Moozarmi couldn't understand how he wasn't sick and tired of falafel by now. He looked forward to the fried chickpea wraps at about this time of day, every day. No matter where in Iraq their job took them, a falafel vendor was always just around the corner.

During the last two months, the pair of agents from Iraq's Ministry of Interior Investigations Unit was assigned the case of the Christian priest abductions. This morning, they'd responded to a call from Father Zephyros Topolis of the Christian Church of Kanisah, in the dusty northwestern Mosul suburb of the same name. Topolis claimed men had scouted out the small warehouse he'd turned into a chapel, an insignificant structure compared with the Sahaba Mosque two blocks north and Mosul's Grand Mosque just across the Tigris to the east.

Lambert had gotten to know Topolis during his time in Mosul. The priest had his mobile phone number. This morning had been the first time he'd used it. The agents spent the morning walking the neighborhood, talking to locals. It looked like a false alarm. He couldn't blame Topolis for being jumpy; news of the recent abductions had become known throughout Iraq's small, but close-knit, Christian community.

Despite the pounding in his head, Lambert finally felt hungry, probably because he'd skipped breakfast. He'd accepted hangovers as his price for avoiding sleepless nights being haunted by memories of Fallujah and its aftermath.

A falafel vendor opened a block east on Hay 17 Tammuz, Kanisah's main thoroughfare named for the fasting holiday. Lambert ordered and the food soon arrived.

"Only two today?" Samir asked in Arabic.

"Working out later, don't want to feel bloated," Lambert answered, also fluent in Arabic since his college days.

His partner shook his head, unwrapped three dried chicken kebabs, and joined him at the small table on the vendor's patio. It was Samir's third month serving with him, having replaced his former partner, who'd become their unit chief.

He started on his second wrap, then heard muffled gunfire around the corner. With the ebb and flow of Islamic State activity, it was a common sound in the rougher sections of Mosul.

Samir pushed his chair back and quickly stood, apparently assuming they'd investigate.

"How about we finish lunch?"

Samir looked appalled. "We should check that out."

Lambert turned his head slightly. "Not our mission."

The diminutive Iraqi turned in the direction of the blasts, rubbed a palm across his close-cropped scalp, then turned back. "I thought justice was our mission."

Now it was Lambert's turn to roll his eyes. He'd served with others so motivated. In fact, Samir reminded him of himself after his 1999 commission in the US Army. It now seemed a lifetime ago. "Come on, Mooz, we can't save them all."

"Could be at the church," Samir prompted.

Good point, Lambert thought.

Louder gunfire erupted from the same area, this time fully automatic.

"Okay, let's go."

The pair abandoned their food and bolted around the corner. From two blocks south, Lambert saw a black van parked in front of the church. Two figures in black tactical gear stood between the van and the church entrance aiming what looked like Heckler & Koch HK33 machine guns. His pulse surged as he gestured for Samir to cross over and approach from the left side of the street, opposite the van. With their ministry-

issued Beretta 96A1 pistols drawn, the few frightened civilians running in their direction gave a wide berth.

Lambert felt his legs weaken as he crouched behind an old Toyota facing the church twenty yards south. He engaged the gunman nearest him. “Drop the rifle!” he shouted in Arabic.

The surprised figure swung the H&K around and let loose a barrage of 5.56mm, walking the bullet impacts down the street and onto the car.

A rivulet of sweat ran down his back as thoughts of his initial training at Washington State’s Fort Lewis came rushing back—specifically the drills emphasizing the difference between concealment and cover. From his squat behind the right rear fender, he took two small steps left to position the engine block between him and the unrelenting stream of lead. At the left rear fender, he’d be able to slip back behind the car if the shooter swung around to the other side of the van for a clear shot down the street.

His jaw tensed as the shattered glass from the Toyota’s rear window rained down on and around him. A sudden silence gave way to two sounds near the van, similar in volume but different in timbre. The first was the hollow, high-pitched sound of the empty H&K magazine hitting the street. The second was a deeper-pitched thud.

The shooter dropped his replacement magazine!

Lambert took a deep breath, swung around the left rear fender, and set his sights on the shooter as the man picked up the loaded magazine. His first shot missed, hitting the van just above the rear bumper. His second shot impacted the shooter on his right rib cage, spinning him clockwise. The impact only focused the shooter’s attention onto his new location.

Body armor!

The gunman’s head jerked right as sounds of pistol fire peppered the van’s driver’s side window. Samir had engaged the other shooter.

The second figure already had the van started and shouted something unintelligible, prompting the first to dart around and dive into the open sliding door on the right. The van raced north as both agents emptied their magazines in an attempt to flatten the rear tires—tires that seemed

to be the run flat type used on armored cars. They replaced magazines just as the van turned a corner.

First-class weapons and armored vans—who the hell are these guys?

The double doors to the church burst open. A young man, also in paramilitary garb, pushed Father Topolis out with a pistol to his head. His face next to that of the elderly Topolis emphasized just how young he was. The young gunman looked intense and moved in quick, jerking movements like a cornered animal. The priest's blood-splattered face displayed a badly broken nose.

Lambert felt rage replace fear. He nevertheless waved his left hand downward in a calming gesture while struggling to appear calm himself. "Take it easy . . . put the gun down and we can talk," he said in Arabic.

"You get back! I kill him!" the gunman said, also in Arabic, and obviously not his native language. "You give car! Or—"

With an apparently unexpected surge of energy, Topolis bent forward, escaping the young man's grip and thrusting his head out of the line of fire before the gunman reactively pulled the trigger. The priest then dropped to his knees.

Both agents, sights already locked on the gunman, returned fire. Samir put his shot at chest center while Lambert, assuming this gunman was armored like the other, put his round in the man's mouth, blowing out the back of his head. The gunman fell backward, and reflex action pulled his semiautomatic's trigger a second time.

Topolis stood. A red spot appeared on the side of his robe. A look of horror appeared on his face. He clutched his stomach, then stumbled back inside the church.

"Father, wait . . ."

"Lambert! Down the street!" Samir pointed north.

A man with a large mark on his left cheek sat on a motorcycle. He held a metal box in his left hand and a mobile phone to his ear with his right. When he saw he was noticed, he dropped the phone into his shirt pocket and pressed buttons on the box.

Two explosions sounded from inside the church. A third tore the body of the dead gunman apart and soaked the sidewalk in blood.

Holy mother of Jesus, Lambert said to himself.

Stunned and temporarily deafened, Lambert watched the man spin the bike around and speed around the same corner as the van.

The two agents turned and approached the entrance to the church from opposite sides of the open double doors. Except for the ringing in Lambert's ears, all was quiet. They spun into the doorway and scanned the nave for more gunmen. He noticed the priest's continued struggle through the smoke toward the altar. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw three figures in monk's cloaks slumped over the backs of pews to the left. Sprawled out in the center aisle near the entrance lay the remains of two figures, blown apart like the gunman outside, lying in a pool of blood. The smell of burning flesh filled the church. He fought back the urge to vomit.

Lambert moved along the right wall, Samir the left. They cleared spaces between pews on their way forward. By the time they reached the front pew and determined the entire nave was clear, Topolis was behind the altar.

He joined the priest. "Mooz, call an ambulance." Assuming Topolis was taking refuge out of fear, he tried to comfort the priest. "Father, they're gone. An ambulance is on the way. Stay still."

Topolis spoke in a short exhalation. "Help me . . ."

Lambert was about to repeat that help was on the way, but then noticed the priest punching the corner of the wooden altar.

The wood at the corner splintered, and Topolis jabbed his hand into the gap. The priest pulled out an object no larger than a cigarette lighter, wrapped in a rag tied in knots at both ends, and thrust it into his hands. "Richard . . . don't let them find it . . . protect Cyprus . . ." After those words, Topolis collapsed.

Lambert checked for a pulse. He found none, and his chin quivered. With the amount of blood loss, he knew nothing could be done and felt the air crushed from his lungs.

Why didn't the priest just stay still?

The sound of sirens began converging on the church.

Lambert knew he had to swallow the pain and act. He untied the rag, revealing a piece of marble. But not just marble. It was a domino. Three-dot and five-dot squares on one side, one-dot and four-dot squares on

the other. Single words were etched into all four edges. Each in capital letters. And each in Latin. He shook his head; how could he be of Italian heritage and even speak Italian, yet have such a hard time with its parent language? It had been a curse during his college days when studying history, for which he received constant but good-humored ridicule from his classmates. He shook his head again and pocketed the stone. As important as it may be, playing with dominoes would have to wait.

The local police entered the church. He and Samir held up their Ministry of Interior IDs. For the next twenty minutes, explanations of events were given and recorded. No forms of identification were found on the remains of the gunmen in black or the armed monks. A closer inspection of the gunmen's remains revealed nylon web gear, secured by miniature padlocks in the back of each. Built into each harness was evidence of directional explosives, in front and in back, designed to kill the wearers and anyone positioned directly ahead or behind. Lambert assumed all charges had been detonated remotely by the blackened-cheek man on the motorcycle. He glanced at the remains of the gunmen in the center aisle and winced, knowing the horrible scene would remain in his memory.

Lambert exchanged contact information with the Mosul precinct officer in charge and agreed to meet again if any other information was desired. He didn't report on the priest's last words or the domino. Since they had possible bearing on the more general case of Christian priest abductions, he wanted more time to work on any potential connections.

The two agents walked back to their unmarked Hyundai SUV, one of many used by the MOI's Investigations Unit. Lambert solemnly shared the priest's last words and the domino with his partner.

Samir rubbed his chin stubble. "What did he mean by that?"

"Not sure. Did you notice the rifles they had? HK33s. Very pricey. And the bullet-proof van?"

Samir nodded. "Yeah, I put four rounds in the driver's side window. None penetrated."

Lambert assumed the four impact points had been in a precise group. A few times during the three months they'd been partners, he joined

Samir at the range. During all his years in the military and intelligence communities, he'd never seen a better pistol marksman.

"So who do you think they were?" Samir asked.

"Don't know, but I think the driver was yelling in Farsi."

"I couldn't hear from across the street." Samir looked back at the domino. "So you don't know the words on these edges?"

Lambert sighed. "No, but I know just who to call."

5:25 P.M. GST
NORTHEASTERN MOSUL

The accusations from southwest Tehran were thrown across the encrypted telephone line in guttural Farsi. "You allow them death too soon."

"Apologies, Excellency," was the reply from Iraq. "Those at the Church of Kanisah were ready for us."

"Bested by Christian monks?"

"They had outside help . . ."

"Uncover more about this church, and the 'outside help' you refer to. It may lead to what we seek—and allow you to redeem yourself."

"Yes, Excellency."

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Thanks for reading. If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving
an honest review.

