

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



The Messiah Code

Michael Cordy

About the Book

At the moment of his supreme triumph, a man of science dodges an assassin's bullet and loses everything that truly matters in his life. Now only a miracle can save Dr Tom Carter's dying daughter: the blood of salvation shed twenty centuries ago.

In the volatile heart of the Middle East, amid the devastating secrets of an ancient brotherhood awaiting a new messiah, Tom Carter must search for answers to the mysteries that have challenged humankind since the death and resurrection of the greatest Healer who ever walked the Earth. Because suddenly Carter's life, the life of his little girl, and the fate of the world hang in the balance . . .

After two thousand years, the wait is over . . .

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THE MESSIAH CODE

Michael Cordy



CORGI BOOKS

For Jenny and Phoebe

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'They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale of our existence . . . they go by the name of genes.'

RICHARD DAWKINS

'Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for.'

ROBERT BROWNING

PROLOGUE

1968. SOUTHERN JORDAN.

Was it really true? After two thousand years of waiting, had the prophecy finally come to pass in his lifetime, during his leadership?

The Sikorsky helicopter passed over Petra, its shadow flitting like an insect over the ancient city carved into cliffs of rock. The magnificent statues and pillars glowed red in the late afternoon light, but Ezekiel De La Croix didn't look down; for once he was oblivious to the breathtaking beauty of the deserted city below him. Keeping his eyes on the horizon ahead, he searched the endless ocean of sand for the place where the helicopter would eventually set down.

One of his two fellow passengers – their dark suits as creased as his own – stirred beside him. Both men slept, exhausted from their journey. They had not rested since travelling to Geneva, where they had interrupted his board meeting at the Brotherhood's bank in order to bring him the news.

The news that would change everything. If it were true.

Checking the Rolex on his wrist, Ezekiel brushed a hand through his thin white hair. From being told what had happened, to chartering the plane to Amman and boarding the Brotherhood's waiting helicopter, it had taken a whole working day to get here, as well as costing thousands more Swiss francs than the scheduled flight. But then money had never been an issue for the Brotherhood, only time; two thousand years of time.

They should be only minutes away now. He nervously twisted the ring of leadership on his finger – a blood-red ruby mounted in a cross of white gold – and reassured himself that he couldn't have come here any sooner.

The rhythmic 'whup-whup' of the rotor blades only served to heighten his tension as the helicopter sped across the

sand, leaving the cliffs of Petra far behind. A further ten minutes elapsed before he finally saw what he was looking for: five lone rocks clustered in a defiant fist against the surrounding desert. He sat forward and looked down at the tallest pillar of rock, over forty feet high. Its crooked shape seemed to be beckoning him. A shiver ran down the back of his neck. The power of this place had always moved him, but today it was almost too much to bear.

The five rocks featured on few maps, and then only as a series of contour lines, never a name. Few outside the Brotherhood were aware of their existence, apart from the ancient water finders, the Nabataeans, who thousands of years ago wandered this sandy wilderness. And in more recent centuries, the nomadic Bedouin. But even these princes of the desert avoided the cluster of rocks, eschewing their meagre shade, preferring to move north to Petra. For reasons known only to themselves they felt uneasy going too close to this place they called *Asbaa El-Lah* – the fingers of God.

‘Going down!’ shouted the pilot above the noise of the rotors.

Ezekiel said nothing, still mesmerized by the rocks looming up below him. Parked beneath the overhang of one, he could make out three dusty Land Rovers. A fan of matting was draped from their rear bumpers to cover their tracks in the sand. Clearly other members were already here.

Ezekiel glanced at the men asleep beside him. In the world outside the Brotherhood one was an eminent American industrialist, the other a prominent Italian politician. Both were members of the six-strong Inner Circle and Ezekiel assumed that the others had already assembled by the Sacred Cavern. He wondered how many more from the Brotherhood had also been drawn here by the rumours. Even their organization’s obsession with secrecy couldn’t hide this.

As they neared the base of the tallest rock, the noise of the rotors seemed to increase. When the helicopter finally landed Ezekiel De La Croix threw open the door and, with a grace that belied his sixty years, leaped out onto the sun-baked ground. Squinting against the stinging grains of sand, he hurried out from under the rotors. Ahead he could see an opening in the tall rock. A man, dressed in a lightweight suit, stood beneath the cave's archway and Ezekiel immediately recognized him as Brother Michael Urquart, another member of the Inner Circle. Urquart had been a highly successful lawyer, but when Ezekiel looked at his bloated, aged frame he worried whether the Brother, like so many others in the Inner Circle, was now too old and too tired to meet the new challenges ahead.

Ezekiel extended his right hand, taking Brother Michael's in his. 'May he be saved,' Ezekiel said.

The Brother's left hand then clasped his, the two handshakes forming a cross. 'So he may save the righteous,' replied Urquart, completing the ancient greeting.

Their hands parted and Ezekiel demanded, 'Has it changed again?' His eyes dared the man to tell him his gruelling journey had been wasted.

Brother Michael's tired face broke into a smile. 'No, Father Ezekiel, it is still as you were told.'

The tension Ezekiel felt in every muscle only allowed him to return the briefest flicker of a smile. Ignoring the other two Brothers now alighting groggily from the helicopter, he patted Urquart on the shoulder and walked into the cave.

The eroded space was no different to any of the natural caves found in these parts. Some ten feet high, with a width and depth each approaching twenty feet, there were no obvious signs of man's intervention, apart from the torches resting against the walls. But ahead of him in the gloom Ezekiel was relieved to see that the concealed portal in the far wall had been opened; the heavy stone could take ages to lever aside. Walking through the opening Ezekiel De La

Croix was greeted by two large gas lamps, which illuminated a mosaic floor and walls carved with the names of all those who had gone before: the thousands of Brothers who had waited in vain for this moment to arrive. In the centre of the chamber were the Great Stairs, a rough hewn spiral staircase that snaked its way two hundred feet down into the rock beneath the sands of Jordan.

Without waiting for the others Ezekiel made his way down the worn steps. He ignored the rope handrail, using the cool surface of the stone walls to steady himself as he made the descent. At the bottom the inky darkness was beaten back by flame torches, flickering in a subterranean breeze blown in from the labyrinth of air tunnels. In this pulsing light the carvings and frescoes on the low ceiling seemed to dance before him.

From here he entered the meandering passageway that led to the Sacred Cavern. Restraining himself from breaking into a run he hurried down the passage, his heels clicking on the smooth rock floor polished by countless feet before him.

Turning the last corner he heard voices and saw about ten men gathered outside the ten-foot-tall ebony doors, carved with heraldic chevrons and crosses, which guarded the cavern. Plainly the news had spread beyond the Inner Circle, and others from the Brotherhood had come to see if the rumours were true. He recognized the last two members of the Inner Circle standing by the arched doors: stout Brother Bernard Trier, nervously stroking his goatee beard, and the tall, gaunt Brother Darius. Darius had seen Ezekiel first and raised his hand to still the group, who immediately turned to their leader and fell silent.

Brushing past the assembled Brothers, Ezekiel exchanged the ritual greeting with Brother Darius.

‘May he be saved.’

‘So he may save the righteous.’

Their hands parted and before Ezekiel could question him Darius turned to his younger colleague, saying:

‘Brother Bernard, you will wait here while I escort the Father inside. Once he has given his decision, and declared the sign genuine, you may open the doors to the others.’

Bernard opened the left door a few inches, its ancient hinges groaning in protest. Ezekiel and Darius stole inside, then the door was shut behind them, the noise of its closing echoing around the space before them.

As always when Ezekiel entered the Sacred Cavern he paused, struck by its simple grandeur: the rough, square pillars supporting the tons of rock above; the tapestries that adorned the chiselled walls; the multitude of torches and candles whose warm light gilded the hewn ceiling of rock with the appearance of beaten gold. But today his eyes moved to one place only, to the altar at the far end of the cavern.

He strode past the pillars to gain a clearer view, into the centre of the mosaic floor. The altar, with its familiar white linen cloth emblazoned with the red cross, was visible now. But his eyes focused in front of it, on the round fissure in the stone floor. The hole, no larger than a man’s head, was lined with lead in the shape of a star. A two-foot flame issued from its core.

With hesitant steps Ezekiel De La Croix approached the Sacred Fire that had burned for over two thousand years. Pacing around it four times he eventually acknowledged the truth of what he saw. There could be no more doubt. The flame that had burned orange for almost twenty centuries had changed to white, a blue-white of dazzling brightness not seen since the first Messiah had walked the earth.

The tears came then. He couldn’t stop them. His sense of destiny and honour too great. He had always suspected that with the passing of the second millennium the change in the Sacred Flame that heralded *Parousia* – the Second Coming – could occur. But he had never dared hope that the prophecy might come true in his lifetime. Yet now, during his leadership, it had finally come to pass. He only wished his

father, and every ancestor and past member of the Brotherhood listed on the walls above, could share this moment with him – the moment to which they had dedicated their lives.

‘Father Ezekiel, shall I allow in the others?’ asked the hoarse voice of Brother Darius behind him.

Ezekiel turned and saw that the Brother’s eyes were also wet with tears. He smiled. ‘Yes my friend. Let them see what we have seen.’

Waiting by the altar, he watched the members of the Inner Circle stream into the Sacred Cavern, followed by those Brothers who had been drawn here by rumour alone. He said nothing for a while, allowing them to feast their famished eyes on the flame. When they had seen their fill he raised his arms for silence.

‘My brethren, the sign is genuine. The Prophecy of Lazarus has come to pass.’ Pausing, he scanned their faces, trying to meet every eye with his. ‘The Messiah walks among us once more. Our long wait has ended, and the search can now begin.’

As he watched his jubilant followers, Ezekiel had only one prayer on his lips: that he would live long enough to fulfil the Primary Imperative of the Brotherhood of the Second Coming. Smiling now, he raised his arms high into the air as if reaching for heaven itself.

‘May he be saved,’ he said, his voice booming out across the cavern.

Every face glowed with excitement as they threw their arms in the air, responding with one voice:

‘So he may save the righteous.’

PART I

THE PROPHETS WITHIN

MIDNIGHT. 10 DECEMBER 2002.
STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN.

It continues to snow. As it has done throughout the award ceremony and the celebration banquet that followed. Huge flakes of white fall from the dark sky, appearing suddenly in the powerful lights that illuminate the red brick of the Stadshuset, Stockholm's City Hall. Despite the cold and the snow, a small hardy crowd has gathered by the steps to watch the Royal Couple and the Prizewinners leave.

Hands pushed deep into overcoat pockets, one broad-shouldered figure moves to the front, perhaps hoping for a better view. But as Olivia follows Dr Tom Carter out of the City Hall and into the Swedish night, she doesn't notice this watcher's unusual eyes staring at her husband.

She's too busy checking that her eight-year-old daughter buttons her red coat. 'Put your hat on too, Holly. It's freezing.'

Holly scrunches up her hazel eyes as she buttons her collar. 'It makes me feel dorky.'

'Dorky? That's a new one.' Olivia laughs and puts the Russian-style fur hat over Holly's spiky blond hair. 'Anyway, it's better to feel dorky than cold.'

'You don't look dorky, Holly,' Tom says, turning to his daughter. He crouches down to Holly's level, his blue eyes studying her like she's something in his laboratory. Then he shrugs and smiles. 'Well, perhaps a little.'

Holly giggles then, as he takes her hand and leads her down the steps.

They look good together, thinks Olivia, following behind. Their daughter is beautiful, although Olivia would never dare tell her that. Just getting Holly to forsake her jeans and

Nikes and put on a dress for the ceremony had been a major achievement.

Tom turns and laughs at something Holly says, and Olivia sees his intense blue eyes soften. Looking at his tall, gangly frame and the flakes of snow resting in his unruly black hair, she is reminded how handsome he is, especially in the white tie and tails he wears beneath his cashmere coat. Both he and Jasmine deserved the Prize and Olivia feels so proud of them that she barely notices the biting cold.

At that moment Dr Jasmine Washington comes up beside her. The young computer scientist's short, styled afro is hidden beneath the hood of a bright blue cape, which looks almost electric in the spotlights. The dark skin of her elfin face contrasts with the snow, and the whites of her eyes.

Next to her is Jack Nichols, Tom's business partner at GENIUS Biotech Diagnostics. He walks straight up to her husband and pats him on the shoulder, congratulating him again. A few inches shorter than Tom, Jack is still over six foot, and powerful with it. His craggy face, complete with a crescent-shaped scar running from his left nostril to the left side of his mouth, makes him look more like a boxer than the joint head of the world's largest biotech company.

Their group is now almost complete as they make their way to the waiting limousines, their interiors lit up like carriages of old. Olivia is impressed with the size of the crowd gathered at the base of the steps. She suspects that most of them, along with the police, are focused on King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia, whose limousine is just leaving. But more than enough flashlights focus on their small group.

'Jazz, where are the others?' asks Olivia. Tom's father and Jasmine's fiancé are also in their party.

Jasmine gestures behind her. 'They're back there talking with the guy who won the Literature prize.'

'So how does it feel being a Nobel Laureate?' Olivia asks, smiling at her old room-mate from Stanford. 'And to think,

twelve or so years ago, you were worried about getting a job that would make a difference. Remember?’

Jasmine laughs, her teeth white against her skin. ‘Yeah.’ She shrugs dismissively, but Olivia can see how thrilled she is. Getting a scholarship to Stanford, followed by a PhD from MIT, were impressive achievements for anyone, let alone a ghetto kid from the Projects of South Central LA. But this – this was something else.

‘And now you and Tom have changed the world,’ says Olivia. They had as well, according to the head of the Karolinska Institute, the body that awards the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology. The short, silver-haired man had hailed Tom’s brainchild, born of his mastery of genetics and Jasmine’s genius with protein-based computers, the most significant scientific achievement since Watson and Crick discovered the DNA double helix. One that would save countless lives. Olivia remembers how back in January 1999 Tom and Jasmine had first demonstrated the Genescope’s ability to decode every human gene from just a single body cell. In one stroke their invention had made the international Human Genome Project redundant.

Jasmine reaches forward and pats Holly on the back. ‘Well, my goddaughter didn’t seem too impressed. I saw her yawn twice.’

‘Were you yawning in the ceremony, Holly?’ asks Tom with a laugh.

Holly gives a sheepish shrug and blows a snowflake off her nose. ‘No. Well, a little. It was pretty long wasn’t it?’

Tom turns his head and catches Olivia’s eye behind him. They smile at each other and he extends his other hand behind his back, towards her. They are now some ten feet from the limousine. Their hands clasp and Tom turns round, leaning towards her like he does when he’s about to kiss her.

At that moment the broad-shouldered figure steps out of the crowd in front of them.

Moving closer to Tom, Olivia doesn't see the person at first. Then out of the corner of her eye she sees the crescent-shape scar on Jack Nichols's face twist into a scowl. Why does he look so angry? So frightened?

Then time seems to slow down.

There is a sharp report, and Jack is pushing Tom away from her. Wrenching his hand out of hers, making him fall against Holly.

In that split instant she clearly sees the man in the big-shouldered coat. He's standing in front of her, pointing at where Tom was.

Where she is.

A flash comes from the man's hand and another report cracks the cold night. An enormous force hammers into her chest, pushing the air out of her lungs, throwing her onto the ground. Then another impact hits her, and another, and another, rolling her down the steps like a rag doll. She is more stunned than pained when she tries vainly to get up.

She must help Tom and Holly.

On the steps above her she can see Jasmine standing stock still, her electric blue cape dark with blood.

Olivia hears a scream and sees Holly's big hazel eyes – so like her own – staring at her with horror. She's no longer wearing her hat and Olivia's first thought is that Holly will get cold. Olivia tries to smile. She wants to reassure Holly, but she can't move and the back of her head feels wet and sticky. She suddenly realizes that this is all she can feel.

As her head rolls to one side she locks eyes with her fleeing killer, who is already fading back into the stunned crowd, and is surprised by what she sees.

Where's Tom? she thinks. He'll make everything all right.

She hears him calling her name. He sounds far, far away.

Then, like a forgotten thought, his voice is gone, and she sees and bears no more.

'Olivia! Olivia! Olivia!'

The more Dr Tom Carter screamed his wife's name, the harder he found it to believe what he saw. Crawling down the icy steps, he ignored the one bullet wound in his own leg. In all his years as a surgeon he had never seen so much blood from one person; the snow around Olivia's body was red with it. This couldn't be happening. Not tonight of all nights.

Everything had happened too fast – *was* happening too fast. Seconds ago he had everything. And now . . .

He could barely continue the thought. The world had gone mad. The crowd was shouting and screaming as the police tried to hold it back, forming a circle around his mini hell. Sirens screamed and cameras flashed. Jack was coming towards him, his face ashen white.

Leaning over Olivia, Tom gently brushed strands of blond hair from her face, expecting her open eyes to blink, to smile in recognition. But they just stared back at him. There was something strange about her head. With horrible detachment he realized that the back of her skull was missing.

He bent down and held her to him. 'Why?' he cried, unaware he was shouting his thoughts out loud.

Then a realization, even colder than the night, froze his heart. Jack had pushed him out of the line of fire. The killer had been aiming at *him*, not Olivia.

He should be dead, not her.

Guilt, like a dagger, pierced the shock, making him retch. Then through the chaos, he heard a small whimpering sound behind him.

Holly? A panic seized him, just as Jack put a hand on his shoulder.

'Holly?' he shouted, pushing his friend away, twisting round to see his bloodstained daughter being comforted by her godmother. Jasmine's face was pale beneath her dark skin. Reaching for Holly, Tom checked his daughter for injuries, all the time looking into pleading eyes, which

begged him to explain what no sane man could. With a relief so fierce it made him gasp, Tom realized she was physically unhurt and squeezed her to his chest.

‘It’ll be OK,’ he said, stroking Holly’s face, putting himself between her and Olivia. ‘It’ll all be OK. I promise you.’ He spoke the words as much for his sake as hers, and as the paramedics pushed through the circle of police, all he could hold on to was the fact that at least Holly was unharmed.

At least she was safe.

SATURDAY, 21 DECEMBER 2002. BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

What Dr Jasmine Washington couldn't figure out was why Tom Carter had done it, particularly so soon after the shooting. Perhaps it had something to do with the tumour the Swedish surgeon had found in Olivia's brain when examining her head wound. Whatever the reason, it made her angry.

The lawns of Mount Ashburn Cemetery were white-grey with frost, the same colour as the winter sky. A watery afternoon sun failed to warm the hundred-or-so people who had gathered in this monochrome landscape to celebrate Olivia's life, and mark her death.

Jasmine Washington stood between her goddaughter and her tall fiancé, Larry Strummer. She was relieved that for once the media were keeping a respectable distance, along with the discreet police presence, some forty yards away. In addition to Olivia's relations, GENIUS colleagues and Tom's peers from the scientific and medical community, Jasmine recognized many of the mourners. The State Governor stood alongside the Swedish Ambassador, come to show his countrymen's horror and sorrow. Next to them were teachers from South Boston Junior School, where Olivia had taught English and Music. Children from her class were there too, the same class Holly attended. Some were crying, but all kept still and silent. Olivia would have been proud of them.

Jasmine felt too angry to cry for the loss of her best friend. She'd already cried more tears in the last eleven days than in all her thirty-three years. Jasmine had still been a sassy scholarship kid from the Projects when she'd first met Olivia at Stanford. Gaining a prestigious Computer Sciences

scholarship to one of the top schools hadn't seemed such a big deal at the time. As a kid her strict Baptist parents had banned her from the streets of South Central LA, so she'd built her first computer when she was eleven and spent most of her formative years prowling the cyberstreets instead. Still, it was ironic how it had been a computer error at Stanford that had roomed her with a blond, artistic WASP from Maine, majoring in English Literature. It still made Jasmine smile how, despite being opposites, they had been drawn to each other from the start.

Jasmine pulled her canary-yellow cashmere coat tighter around her shoulders. It was the brightest colour she could find for the funeral. Her friend would have approved. She watched Tom, Jack and the other pallbearers carrying Olivia's coffin to the grave. She winced with Tom as she saw how he favoured his wounded leg, no doubt welcoming the distraction of the pain. If she'd hated the last eleven days, then he must have been through the worst kind of hell. Even so, she still couldn't help feeling anger at what he'd done since the killing. Or at least what she *thought* he'd done. The evidence she'd seen in the lab this morning wasn't conclusive.

She looked down at her goddaughter, standing silent next to the slender, white-haired figure of her grandfather, Alex Carter. She wondered how the semi-retired Harvard Professor of Theology would explain why Olivia had been gunned down. It had certainly stretched her faith. The Swedish police and now the FBI had a theory that it was some anti-genetics activist trying to kill Tom. But despite having the killer on film, they still had no real idea of who he was or why he'd done it.

At least the psychiatrists had been encouraged by how well Holly was coping. Far from blotting out the horror of seeing her mother shot, she had almost perfect recall. In many ways she was more prepared to face up to what had happened than anybody. Jasmine had even heard the little

girl ask Tom on more than one occasion how *he* was coping. It was this courage and the fact that Holly was doing well that made Jasmine so angry with her father.

Her eyes searched Tom's long face as she watched him and the other pallbearers lay Olivia's coffin beside the grave. The more she looked into those blue eyes, the more she saw something other than grief there: fear, or something close to it. Every time Tom looked at his daughter, Jasmine became more and more convinced that what she had found in the lab this morning had been his work.

It had to have something to do with the tumour the Swedish surgeon had found in Olivia's brain, when examining her. A tumour which by all accounts would have killed her, even if the killer's bullets hadn't. Tom's mother had died of a similar cancer about thirty years ago; Jasmine knew that. It hadn't taken a shrink to know that this was one of the main reasons Tom had applied his incredible intellect to curing the disease, not only qualifying as a surgeon at Johns Hopkins two years ahead of his peers, but then completing a PhD in genetics at Harvard with more ease than most graduate high school. Still, just because his mother and wife had similar cancers, it didn't justify running a full gene scan on Holly.

As Tom moved away from the coffin, Jasmine cast her mind back to her third year at Stanford. Over twelve years ago now. She thought she was so smart until she attended that talk given by Tom Carter MD PhD. Tom was in his early thirties then and already a force in genetics – seeing gene therapy as *the* way ahead for curing cancer and inherited disease. At the time, his company GENIUS specialized in genetherapy trials and the development of genetically engineered proteins, such as recombinant Interleukin 2 and growth hormone. The company was relatively small, but already growing in size and reputation.

Tom's talk at Stanford had been entitled: *The use of computers in decoding the Human Genome*. Jasmine remembered how she had stifled a laugh when this tall, gangly guy with wild hair stood up to speak. But she stopped laughing as soon as he began talking about his vision of a hybrid computer/microscope that could read an individual's entire genome from the copy stored in the DNA of one body cell. The machine he was talking about would be able to decode every single one of a person's hundred thousand genes from one hair follicle. Tom Carter had wanted to do nothing less than decode the software of the human race. At that moment Jasmine had known she had to work with him, and be part of his vision.

Over three years ago they had realized that vision and created the Genescope. But now just the thought that Tom was using it on his perfectly healthy eight-year-old kid made her seethe. Whatever his reasons were, and however brilliant he was, there were times when Tom Carter could be plain stupid.

Tom limped over to them from the coffin, and stood between Alex and Holly. As the priest began to say his words, Tom reached down to take Holly's hand.

Jasmine tried to catch Tom's eye, but he would only look straight ahead at the grave. There was still time, she told herself. Even if he had run the scan, she could still stop him from reading the results.

Tom was oblivious to both Jasmine's stare and the utterances from the priest at the head of the grave. He could think only of Olivia and his guilt.

Meeting Olivia and marrying her had been his greatest and most undeserved piece of good fortune. He had always been clueless with women, regarding them as a charming but confusing distraction from his work. He still couldn't understand how he had managed to attract the few girlfriends he had. All had been intelligent and most

beautiful, although he had never pursued any of them. Like some problem child, they had adopted him, convinced that with enough love and affection they could make him their Mr Right. All of them had eventually given up on him.

But with the golden-haired Olivia Jane Mallory it had been different. When the precocious Jasmine Washington had introduced Tom to her room-mate, he had suddenly understood what the poets meant by love at first sight. His reaction had been a clinical definition: sweaty palms, pounding heart, loss of appetite, distraction. He had no problem identifying the symptoms, but the sickness and its cause were less scientific, more metaphysical. In one blinding moment Olivia had become as important to him as a part of his own body. From that point he had pursued her with a passion he hadn't known outside his work. In Paris eight months later, she stunned him by accepting his marriage proposal. He couldn't dance, but that night in Montmartre he forgot that, and they had danced till dawn.

Now she was dead. He still couldn't believe it. Only yesterday afternoon he had been in the conservatory of their home in Beacon Hill, her favourite room. He had walked in half expecting to see her reading, or tending her plants. Part of him still thought she would always be in the house; forever in the room next to the one he was in.

He felt Holly's small hand squeeze his, and looked down to see her eyes staring up at him. She was so desperately trying not to cry that if he'd felt less numb he would have cried for her.

He bent down and hugged her, trying to squeeze the pain out of her.

'I miss Mommy, Dad,' she whispered through her sobs. 'I wish the bad man hadn't killed her.'

'So do I, Holly. So do I. But she's safe now, and it's going to be OK,' he soothed in her ear. But he couldn't see how it was ever going to be OK again. He wished he could take Holly's sorrow and feel it himself. His own grief seemed too

deep to reach. He felt so numb he couldn't even summon up rage for the person who had done this.

Only guilt breached his defences. When he had thanked Jack for saving his life, both of them had looked away, not meeting each other's eye; both knowing that Jack's reflexes had not only saved him, but also killed Olivia. Tom shifted his weight to his wounded leg, welcoming the pain. One bullet had passed through his leg while the others had ripped into Olivia's body.

The guilt didn't stop there. It revived memories of his mother's death, and how he had been powerless to help her. Then, after learning of Olivia's tumour, a new strain of guilt had infected him. Instinctively he hugged Holly again. Had other slower, more silent bullets already been fired? Bullets that would again miss him, this time finding an even more vulnerable target?

He had to know.

The priest continued to intone the burial service as the coffin was lowered into the ground. It was only then, as he watched the last, weak rays of the sun catch the brass handles of the casket, that Tom realized his wife was really leaving him; that the sun would never shine on Olivia again. Along with the others he and Holly threw earth into the grave and waited patiently for the priest to finish his words.

As the mourners began to move away from the grave and head towards the cars, he felt the tug on his sleeve. He turned to see Jasmine glaring at him. She was alone, her fiancé Larry already walking off to his car. 'Tom, we need to talk. Now!'

'Can't it wait till we get to the wake?'

'No!'

Tom's father, Alex Carter, was at his side. Stern-faced beneath his mop of white hair, his piercing blue eyes glared out from behind elegant glasses. As always he looked like he was talking to one of his theology students. 'What's the problem?'

‘Something I need to talk to Tom about,’ said Jasmine, giving Tom a meaningful look. ‘Alone!’

Tom suddenly understood. He had been in such a rush this morning he had left his lab workbench a mess, deciding to tidy it up when he returned after the wake to read the results. Jasmine must have been into GENIUS and guessed what he was doing. ‘Dad, could you take Holly on to the wake. We’ll follow behind you.’

Alex looked incredulous. ‘You should be going to the wake with your family,’ he said. ‘You have to be with Holly.’

Tom raised his hand. ‘Dad, please. I can’t explain now.’ He knelt down to Holly’s level and saw her face crumple in disappointment, her eyes red-rimmed. ‘Hol, I just want to talk to Jazz about something. You go home with Grampa, and I’ll meet you there for the wake. OK?’ He hated doing this, but he couldn’t talk to Jasmine about this in front of Holly. Hugging his daughter to him, he kissed her cheek. ‘We’ll be right behind you. OK?’

She gave him a small nod, trying to understand.

‘But Tom –’ protested Alex.

‘Dad, I’ll explain *later*,’ he said, taking Jasmine by the elbow, walking her swiftly away from the mourners waiting to offer their condolences, following her into one of the waiting limousines.

‘When are you going to check the results on Holly’s scan?’ asked Jasmine, once she’d closed the car door.

Tom said nothing at first. He felt strangely relieved that she had found out. He hated keeping secrets. ‘After the wake,’ he replied eventually.

‘Why did you do it, Tom?’

‘I had no choice,’ he said. ‘I have to know.’

‘Bullshit!’ Jasmine replied. ‘Complete bullshit. The Genescope will tell you stuff you don’t want to know – or even need to know. And certainly not right now, Tom.’

Two miles north-east, beyond the University sprawl of Harvard, the campus of GENIUS Biotech Diagnostics was quiet. Most of the employees at the GENIUS head office did not work on Saturday, and certainly not in the evening. Indeed, apart from the halogen security lamps that allowed the CCTV cameras to survey the rectangular protein factories on the eastern perimeter, most of the campus was in darkness.

A few lights were visible in the vast pyramid of photo-sensitive glass that dominated the site, and served as the global headquarters of the world's largest genetics company. But not on the two top floors, which housed the commercial departments, the boardroom and most of the directors' offices, including Jack Nichols's. One light could be seen in the laboratories on the two middle levels. The only glow on the ground floor came from the reception atrium and Jasmine Washington's deserted Information Technology department, which continuously processed data from GENIUS subsidiaries around the world. As happened prior to Christmas, the small ward in the Hospital Suite on the ground floor was empty and in darkness.

At the time Tom Carter and Jasmine Washington were attending Olivia's wake there was no human presence on the GENIUS campus, save the two guards in the main gatehouse and the two who manned the CCTV monitors in the atrium of the pyramid.

However, on the second floor of the glass pyramid, in one section of the Mendel Laboratory Suite, a mind was at work. This mind belonged to an entity called DAN, so named by one of its creators from a simple anagram of the acronym for deoxyribonucleic acid: DNA.

In 1990, based on conferences held in the Eighties the most significant scientific undertaking since the Apollo Space Programme was initiated: The Human Genome Project. Its objective was simple: to identify each and every one of the hundred thousand or so genes that form the