

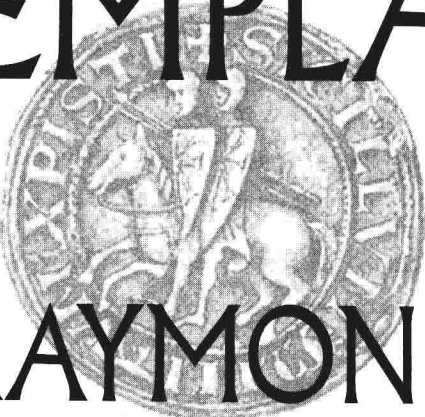
THE LAST TEMPLAR

A NOVEL



RAYMOND KHOURY

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Prologue



ACRE, LATIN KINGDOM OF JERUSALEM, 1291

The Holy Land is lost.

That single thought kept assaulting Martin of Carmaux, its brutal finality more terrifying than the hordes of fighters swarming through the breach in the wall.

He fought to block the thought, to push it away.

Now was not the time to lament. He had work to do.

Men to kill.

His broadsword held high, he charged through the clouds of choking smoke and dust and plunged into the seething ranks of the enemy. They were everywhere, their scimitars and axes ripping into flesh, their warrior howls piercing the haunting, rhythmic beat of the kettle drummers outside the fortress walls.

With all of his strength, he brought down his sword, splitting one man's skull clear to the eyes, his blade springing free as he lunged at his next opponent. Flicking a quick glance to his right, he spotted Aimard of Villiers driving his sword into the chest of another attacker before moving on to his next opponent. Dazed by the wails of pain and the screams of rage around him, Martin felt someone clutch at his left hand and swiftly clubbed the offender away with the pommel of his sword before

bringing down its blade, feeling it cut through muscle and bone. From the corner of his eye, he sensed something menacingly close to his right and instinctively swung his sword at it, slicing through the upper arm of another one of the invaders before slashing open his cheek and severing his tongue in one blow.

It had been hours since he or any of his brothers had known any respite. The Muslim onslaught had not only been ceaseless, it had also been far worse than anticipated. Arrows and projectiles of blazing pitch had rained down incessantly on the city for days, starting more fires than could be tackled at once, while the Sultan's men had dug holes beneath the great walls into which they had packed brushwood that was also set alight. In several places, these makeshift furnaces had cracked the walls that were now crumbling under a barrage of catapulted rocks. The Templars and the Hospitallers had managed, by sheer force of will, to repulse the assault on Saint Anthony's Gate before setting it on fire and retreating. The Accursed Tower, however, had lived up to its name, allowing the rampaging Saracens into the city and sealing its fate.

Gargling shrieks of agony receded into the confused uproar as Martin yanked his sword back and looked around desperately for any sign of hope, but there was no doubt in his mind. The Holy Land was indeed lost. With mounting dread, he realized that they would all be dead before the night was over. They were facing the largest army ever seen, and, despite the fury and the passion coursing through his veins, his efforts and those of his brothers were surely doomed to failure.

It wasn't long before his superiors realized it too. His heart sank as he heard the fateful horn calling on the surviving Knights of the Temple to abandon the city's defenses. His eyes, darting left and right in a confused frenzy, again found those of Aimard of Villiers. He saw in them the same agony, the same shame that was burning through him. Side by side, they fought their way through the scrambling mob and managed to make their way back to the relative safety of the Templar compound.

Martin followed the older knight as he stormed through the throngs of terrified civilians who had taken refuge behind the bourg's massive walls. The sight that greeted them in the great hall shocked him even more than the carnage he had witnessed outside. Lying on a rough refectory table was William of Beaujeu, the grand master of the Knights of the Temple. Peter of Sevrey, the marshal, stood at his side, along with

two monks. The woeful looks on their faces left little room for doubt. As the two knights reached his side, Beaujeu's eyes opened and he raised his head slightly, the movement causing an involuntary groan of pain. Martin stared at him in stunned disbelief. The old man's skin was drained of all color, his eyes bloodshot. Martin's eyes raced down Beaujeu's body, struggling to make sense of the sight, and he spotted the feathered bolt sticking out of the side of his ribcage. The grand master held its shaft in the curve of his hand. With his other, he beckoned Aimard, who approached him, knelt by his side, and cupped his hand with both of his own.

"It is time," the old man managed, his voice pained and weak, but clear. "Go now. And may God be with you."

The words drifted past Martin's ears. His attention was elsewhere, focused on something he'd noticed as soon as Beaujeu had opened his mouth. It was his tongue, which had turned black. Rage and hate swelled in Martin's throat as he recognized the effects of the poisoned bolt. This leader of men, the towering figure who had dominated every aspect of the young knight's life for as long as he could remember, was as good as dead.

He noticed Beaujeu lifting his gaze to Sevrey and nodding almost imperceptibly. The marshal moved to the foot of the table and lifted a velvet cover to reveal a small, ornate chest. It was not more than three hands wide. Martin had never seen it before. He watched in rapt silence as Aimard rose to his feet and gazed solemnly at the chest, then looked back at Beaujeu. The old man held his gaze before closing his eyes again, his breathing taking on an ominous rasp. Aimard went up to Sevrey and hugged him, then lifted the small chest and, without so much as a backward glance, headed out. As he passed Martin, he simply said, "Come."

Martin hesitated and glanced at Beaujeu and at the marshal, who nodded his head in confirmation. He hurried quickly after Aimard and soon realized that they weren't heading toward the enemy.

They were heading for the fortress's moorings.

"Where are we going?" he called out.

Aimard didn't break his step. "The *Falcon Temple* awaits us. Hurry."

Martin stopped in his tracks, his mind reeling in confusion. *We're leaving?*

He had known Aimard of Villiers since the death of his own father, a

knight himself, fifteen years earlier, when Martin was barely five years old. Ever since, Aimard had been his guardian, his mentor. His hero. They had fought many battles together and it was fitting, Martin believed, that they would stand side by side and die together when the end came. But not this. This was insane. This was . . . *desertion*.

Aimard stopped too, but only to grasp Martin's shoulder and push him into motion. "Make haste," he ordered.

"No," Martin yelled, flicking Aimard's hand off him.

"Yes," the older knight insisted tersely.

Martin felt nausea rising in his throat; his face clouded as he struggled for words. "I will not desert our brothers," he stammered. "Not now—not ever!"

Aimard heaved a ponderous sigh and glanced back at the besieged city. Blazing projectiles were arcing into the night sky and hurtling down into it from all sides. Still clutching the small chest, he turned and took a menacing step forward so that their faces were now inches apart, and Martin saw that his friend's eyes were wet with unshed tears. "Do you think I want to abandon them?" he hissed, his voice slicing the air. "Abandon our master—in his final hour? You know me better than that."

Martin's mind seethed with turmoil. "Then . . . *why?*"

"What we have to do is far more important than killing a few more of those rabid dogs," Aimard replied somberly. "It's crucial to the survival of our Order. It's crucial if we are to make sure everything we've worked for doesn't die here as well. We have to go. Now."

Martin opened his mouth to protest, but Aimard's expression was fiercely unequivocal. Martin bowed his head in curt, if unwilling, acquiescence and followed.

The only vessel remaining in the port was the *Falcon Temple*, the other galleys having sailed away before the Saracen assault had cut off the city's main harbor a week earlier. Already low in the water, it was being loaded by slaves, sergeant-brothers, and knights. Question after question tumbled through Martin's brain but he had no time to ask any of them. As they approached the dock, he could see the shipmaster, an old sailor he knew only as Hugh and who, he also knew, was held in high regard by the grand master. The burly man was watching the feverish activity from the deck of his ship. Martin scanned the ship from the aftcastle at the

stern, past its high mast and to the stem from which sprang the figure-head, a remarkably lifelike carving of a fierce bird of prey.

Without breaking step, Aimard's voice bellowed out to the ship's master. "Are the water and provisions loaded?"

"They are."

"Then abandon the rest and set sail at once."

Within minutes, the gangplank was pulled in, the mooring ropes cast off, and the *Falcon Temple* was pulled away from the dockside by oarsmen in the ship's longboat. Before long, the overseer had called out and the banks of galley slaves had dipped their oars into the dark water. Martin watched as the rowers scrambled up onto the deck then hauled the longboat up and made it secure. To the rhythmic beat of a deep gong and the grunts of over a hundred and fifty chained rowers, the ship gathered speed and cleared the great wall of the Templar compound.

As the galley moved into open water, arrows rained down on it while the sea around it erupted with huge, sizzling explosions of white foam as the Sultan's crossbows and catapults were trained on the escaping galley. It was soon beyond their range, and Martin stood up, glancing back at the receding landscape. Hordes of warriors lined the city's ramparts, howling and jeering at the ship like caged animals. Behind them, an inferno raged, resounding with the shouts and screams of men, women, and children, all against the incessant rolling thunder of the drums of war.

Slowly, the ship gathered speed, aided by the offshore wind, its banks of oars rising and falling like wings skimming the darkening waters. On the distant horizon, the sky had turned black and threatening.

It was over.

His hands still shaking and his heart leaden, Martin of Carmaux slowly and reluctantly turned his back on the land of his birth and stared ahead at the storm that awaited them.

Chapter 1



At first, no one noticed the four horsemen as they emerged out of the darkness of Central Park.

Instead, all eyes were focused four blocks south where, under a barrage of flashbulbs and television lights, a steady stream of limos decanted elegantly attired celebrities and lesser mortals onto the curb outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It was one of those mammoth events that no other city could pull off quite as well as New York, least of all when the hosting venue happened to be the Met. Spectacularly lit up and with searchlight beams swirling across the black April sky above it, the sprawling building was like an irresistible beacon in the heart of the city, beckoning its guests through the austere columns of its neoclassical facade, over which floated a banner that read:

TREASURES OF THE VATICAN

There had been talk of postponing the event, or even canceling it altogether. Yet again, recent intelligence reports had prompted the government to raise the national terror alert level to orange. Across the country, state and local authorities had stepped up security measures, and al-

though New York City had been at orange since 9/11, additional precautions were taken. National Guard troops were posted at subways and bridges, while police officers were working twelve-hour shifts.

The exhibition, given its subject matter, was deemed to be particularly at risk. Despite all this, strong wills had prevailed and the museum's board had voted to stick to its plans. The show would go on as planned, further testimony to the city's unbreakable spirit.



A YOUNG WOMAN with impeccable hair and brightly enameled teeth stood with her back to the museum, taking her third shot at getting her intro right. Having failed at studiously knowledgeable and blasé, the reporter was going for earnest this time as she stared into the lens.

"I can't remember the last time the Met hosted such a star-studded party, certainly nothing since the Mayan show and that's going back a few years," she announced as a chubby, middle-aged man stepped out of a limo with a tall, angular woman in a blue evening dress a size too tight and a generation too young for her. "And there's the mayor and his lovely wife," the reporter gushed, "our very own royal family and fashionably late, of course."

—Going on in earnest, she adopted a more serious look and added, "Many of the artifacts on display here tonight have never been seen by the public before, anywhere. They've been locked away in the vaults of the Vatican for hundreds of years and—"

Just then, a sudden surge of whistles and cheers from the crowd distracted her. Her voice trailing off, she glanced away from the camera, her eyes drifting toward the growing commotion.

And that was when she saw the horsemen.

The horses were superb specimens: imperious grays and chestnuts, with flowing black tails and manes. But it was their riders that had roused the crowd.

The four men, riding abreast, were all dressed in identical medieval armor. They had visored helmets, chain-mail vests, flanged plate leggings over black jerkins and quilted hose. They looked as though they had just beamed in through a time-travel portal. Further dramatizing the effect, long scabbarded broadswords hung from their waists. Most striking of all, they wore long white mantles over their armor, each bearing a splayed, blood-red cross.

The horses were now moving at a gentle trot.

The crowd went wild with excitement as the knights advanced slowly, staring ahead, oblivious to the hoopla around them.

“Well, what do we have here? It looks like the Met and the Vatican have pulled out all the stops tonight, and aren’t they magnificent,” the reporter enthused, settling now for plain old showbiz. “Just listen to that crowd!”

The horses reached the curb outside the museum, and then they did something curious.

They didn’t stop there.

Instead, they turned slowly until they were facing the museum.

Without missing a step, the riders gently coaxed their mounts up and onto the sidewalk. Continuing the advance slowly, the four knights guided the horses onto the paved piazza.

Side by side, they ceremoniously climbed up the cascading steps, heading unerringly for the museum’s entrance.

Chapter 2



“Mom, I’ve really gotta go,” Kim pleaded.

—**M**Tess Chaykin looked at her daughter with an annoyed frown on her face. The three of them—Tess, her mother Eileen, and Kim—had only just walked into the museum. Tess had hoped to take a quick look around the crowded exhibits before the speeches, the schmoozing, and the rest of the unavoidable formalities took over. But that would now have to wait. Kim was doing what every nine-year-old inevitably did in these occasions, which was to hold off until the least convenient time had arrived before announcing her desperate need for a restroom.

“Kim, honestly.” The grand hall was teeming with people. Navigating through them to escort her daughter to the ladies’ room wasn’t a prospect Tess relished right now.

Tess’s mother, who wasn’t doing much to hide the small pleasure she was finding in this, stepped in. “I’ll take her. You go on ahead.” Then, with a knowing grin, she added, “Much as I enjoy watching you get your payback.”

Tess flashed her a grimace, then looked at her daughter and smiled, shaking her head. The little face and its glinting green eyes never failed to charm its way out of any situation.

“I’ll meet you in the main hall.” She raised a stern finger at Kim. “Stay close to Nana. I don’t want to lose you in this circus.”

Kim groaned and rolled her eyes. Tess watched them disappear into the melee before turning and heading in.



THE HUGE FOYER OF the museum, the Great Hall, was already crowded with gray-haired men and vertiginously glamorous women. Black ties and evening gowns were de rigueur and, as she looked around, Tess felt self-conscious. She fretted that she stood out as much for her understated elegance as for her discomfort at being perceived as part of the “in” crowd all around her, a crowd she firmly had no interest in.

What Tess didn’t realize was that what people noticed about her had nothing to do with her being understated in the precise, seamed black dress that floated a few inches above her knees, nor with her discomfort at attending platitude-intensive events like this one. People just noticed her, period. They always had. And who could blame them. The seductive mass of curls framing the warm green eyes that radiated intelligence usually triggered it. The healthy, thirty-six-year-old frame that moved in relaxed, fluid strides confirmed it, and the fact that she was totally oblivious to her charms sealed it. It was too bad she’d always fallen for the wrong guys. She’d even ended up marrying the last of that contemptible bunch, a mistake she had recently undone.

She advanced into the main room, the buzz of conversation echoing off the walls around her in a dull roar that made individual words impossible to determine. Acoustics, it seemed, had not been a prime consideration of the museum’s design. She could hear traces of chamber music and tracked it to an all-female string quartet tucked away in a corner, sawing away energetically but almost inaudibly at their instruments. Nodding furtively at the smiling faces in the crowd, she made her way past Lila Wallace’s ever-present displays of fresh flowers and the niche where Andrea della Robbia’s sublime blue-and-white glazed terra-cotta *Madonna and Child* stood gracefully watching over the throng. Tonight though, they had company, as this was only one of many depictions of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary that now adorned the museum.

Almost all of the exhibits were displayed in glass cabinets, and it was

clear from even a cursory glance that many of those exhibits were enormously valuable. Even for someone with Tess's lack of religious conviction, they were impressive, even stirring, and as she glided past the grand staircase and into the exhibition hall, her heart raced ahead with the rising swell of anticipation.

There were ornate alabaster altar pieces from Burgundy with vivid scenes from the life of Saint Martin. Crucifixes by the score, most of them solid gold and heavily encrusted with precious stones; one of them, a twelfth-century cross, consisted of more than a hundred figures carved out of a walrus tusk. There were elaborate marble statuettes and carved wooden reliquaries; even emptied of their original contents, these chests were superb examples of the meticulous work of medieval craftsmen. A glorious brass eagle lectern proudly held its own next to a superlative six-foot painted Spanish Easter candlestick, which had been prized away from the pope's own apartments.

As Tess took in the various displays, she couldn't help but feel recurring pangs of disappointment. The objects before her were of a quality she would have never dared hope for during her years out in the field. True, they had been good, challenging years, rewarding to a certain extent. They had given her a chance to travel the world and immerse herself in diverse and fascinating cultures. Some of the curiosities she had unearthed were on display in a few museums scattered around the globe, but nothing she'd found was noteworthy enough to grace, say, the Sackler Wing of Egyptian Art or the Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art. *Maybe . . . maybe if I'd stuck with it a little bit longer.* She shook the thought away. She knew that that life was over now, at least for the foreseeable future. She would have to make do with enjoying these marvelous glimpses into the past from the remote, passive viewpoint of a grateful observer.

And a marvelous glimpse it was. Hosting the show had been a truly remarkable feat for the Met, because almost none of the items sent over from Rome had ever been previously exhibited.

Not that it was all gleaming gold and glittering jewels.

In a cabinet facing her now was a seemingly mundane object. It was a mechanical device of some sort, about the size of an old typewriter, boxlike and made of copper. It had numerous buttons on its top face as well as interlocking gears and levers protruding from its sides. It seemed out of place amid all this opulence.

Tess brushed aside her hair as she leaned forward to take a closer look. She was reaching for her catalog when, above her own blurred reflection in the glass of the cabinet, another loomed into view as someone came up behind her.

"If you're still looking for the Holy Grail, I'm going to have to disappoint you. It ain't here," a gravelly voice said to her. And although it had been years since she'd heard it, she recognized it even before she turned.

"Clive." She turned, taking in the sight of her former colleague. "How the hell are you? You look great." Which wasn't exactly true; even though he was barely into his fifties, Clive Edmondson looked positively ancient.

"Thanks. How about you?"

"I'm good," she nodded. "So how's the grave-robbing business these days?"

Edmondson showed her the backs of his hands. "The manicure bills are killing me. Other than that, same old same old. Literally," he chuckled. "I hear you joined the Manoukian."

"Yeah."

"And?"

"Oh, it's great," Tess told him. That wasn't true either. Joining the prestigious Manoukian Institute had been a bold stroke for her, but as far as the actual experience of working there went, things weren't all that good. But those things you kept to yourself, especially in the surprisingly gossipy and backstabbing world that archaeology could be. Seeking an impersonal remark, she said, "You know, I really miss being out there with you guys."

His faint smile told her he wasn't buying that. "You're not missing much. We haven't hit the headlines yet."

"It's not that, it's just . . ." She turned, glancing at the sea of displays around them. "Any one of these would have been great. Any one." She looked at him, suddenly melancholic. "How come we never found anything this good?"

"Hey, I'm still hoping. You're the one who traded in the camels for a desk," he quipped. "Not to mention the flies, the sand, the heat, the food, if you can call it that . . ."

"Oh my God, the food." Tess laughed. "Come to think of it, I'm not so sure I really miss it anymore."

"You can always come back, you know."

She winced. It was something she often thought about. “I don’t think so. Not for a while, anyway.”

Edmondson found a grin that seemed more than a little strained. “We’ll always have a shovel with your name on it, you know that,” he said, sounding anything but hopeful. An awkward silence settled between them. “Listen,” he added, “they’ve set up a bar over in the Egyptian Room, and, from the looks of it, they’ve got someone who knows how to mix a decent cocktail. Let me buy you a drink.”

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up with you later,” she said. “I’m waiting for Kim and my mom.”

“They’re here?”

“Yeah.”

He held up his palms. “Whoa. Three generations of Chaykins—that should be interesting.”

“You’ve been warned.”

“Duly noted.” Edmondson nodded as he ventured into the crowd. “I’ll catch you later. Don’t disappear on me.”



OUTSIDE, THE AIR around the piazza was electric. The cameraman jostled to get into a clean shot as the claps and whoops of delight from the elated crowd drowned out his reporter’s efforts at commentating. It got even noisier when the crowd spotted a short, heavy-set man in a brown security guard uniform leave his position and hurry over to the advancing horsemen.

From the corner of his eye, the cameraman could tell something wasn’t exactly going according to plan. The guard’s purposeful stride and his body language clearly indicated a difference of opinion.

The guard raised his hands in a stopping motion as he reached the horses, blocking their procession. The knights reined in their horses, which snorted and stamped, obviously uncomfortable at being kept stationary on the steps.

An argument seemed to be under way. A one-sided one, the cameraman observed, as the horsemen weren’t reacting to the guard’s ranting in any discernible way.

And then one of them finally did something.

Slowly, milking the moment for all its theatricality, the knight closest to the guard, a bear of a man, unsheathed his broadsword and raised it