

# FLARE

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## CHAPTER ONE

Kultepe, Turkey – Present Day

Ignoring the threat of a cave-in, Robby Carter inched his way along the uneven, narrow tunnel, anticipating the discoveries that lay only a few feet beyond the light beam thrown from his hard hat. A flicker of gold danced suddenly in the darkness ahead. His pulse raced. He hadn't been on many digs, and his only finds had been shards of pottery and clay tablets. Hundreds of clay tablets. But he had heard the stories that more experienced archaeologists told of finding priceless golden objects, and the possibilities offered by that single gleam tantalized his imagination.

"Don't come any closer!" he yelled into his headset. "The soil above me is unstable. I don't trust it. I'll be out in a second." The tone of his voice betrayed both his excitement and his anxiety.

"Be careful!" the female voice crackled from his earpiece. He knew Alex was somewhere in the darkness behind him. "Robby, we're not supposed to go in this far without Dr. Richardson's OK. You're going to get us in trouble again."

He ignored her reply, then forgot the excitement for a moment, when loose dirt and gravel from the weakened ceiling sprinkled down onto their heads and shoulders. He had no intention of getting them both buried alive, and started to back out of the narrow opening.

Then he saw the flash again, a golden invitation, just out of reach where the passage narrowed to a hole about a foot wide. This part of the tunnel had been dug many thousands of years ago, and was now nearly filled with fine dust that sifted down from the ceiling.

He wedged himself sideways and pushed forward. He knew he was strong enough to force his way through the narrowest part of the tunnel, and seeing the gleam ahead made him more determined than ever to reach the opening.

He inched toward the opening, detached a flashlight from his belt and pushed it ahead of him. Abruptly, the light fell through and rolled into a wide, open space beyond.

"Jesus!"

"Robby! What's the matter?" The dim light in the tunnel behind him brightened.

"Nothing. Don't come any closer. There's a chamber up ahead. My light fell into it. Looks like its never been entered. No sign of burglary. I can see gold pots, and tablets, hundreds of tablets. It must be a library. This is as far as we can go. We'll have to get the diggers to enlarge the tunnel and shore it up. I'm coming out."

But before he backed out, he squeezed a little farther into the hole and stretched out one arm, groping around until he felt what he was looking for.

"A library?" Alex was saying. "Dr. Richardson will freak out!"

Robby slipped out of the narrow passage into the circle of light that surrounded Alex.

"He'll go even freakier when he sees this," he said.

Alex's eyes widened at the sight of the object in his hand. It looked much like the hundreds of Assyrian tablets they had unearthed from the ruins of Kultepe, historical documents that revealed the lives of the people who lived there four thousand years ago. All similarity ended there, for the cuneiform writing inscribed on this tablet had been etched into a plate of pale gold and each character filled with brilliant turquoise enamel. It was larger than the usual tablet, about four inches wide and six inches high, artistically executed with the utmost feeling and delicacy.

He turned the tablet over. On the back was a circle, surrounded by concentric circles etched into the gold. A series of thin, straight lines radiated from the central disc. Around the edges of the tablet, a broken line had been traced. A small symbol, resembling a flame, occurred at regular intervals on the broken line.

The design on the tablet reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite place it. He was still puzzling over the geometric shapes when Alex shook him from thought.

"What's it say?" As she leaned closer, her long, dark hair swept over the gold image.

"It's got a big dent in the middle," she said. "You should be more careful!"

"I didn't dent it," Robby replied. He stuffed the tablet into the large pocket of his jacket. Alex gave him a questioning look.

"I want to examine this a little more before the Turks get their hands on it," he said.

There had been several occasions when important finds, usually objects made of gold, were immediately seized by the local authorities from the Office of Antiquities. The American researchers were subsequently denied access to those artifacts. He didn't want that to happen to this one.

"That could be big trouble, Robby. Ekrem watches all of us like a hawk. Especially you. I don't know why you fight with him so much. You know the penalty for concealing antiquities. Do you want to spend the rest of your life in jail?"

"I doubt it would ever come to that," he said. Seeing the expression on her face, he added "Relax. I'll let him see it after I've had a chance to decipher the inscription." Alex was twenty-seven years old—five years older than he was—and although she joked around a lot, he respected her experience and her opinion.

He lifted the tripod and camera bag she left on the ground. "Are you going to take some more pictures of the entrance?"

"Dr. Richardson will want to see them when he gets back from town," Alex said. "You know how detail-oriented he is."

He studied her face as she unpacked her digital camera equipment. She was different from the other American girls at the college in Istanbul. Her nose wasn't a cute, turned-up American nose, and her teeth were slightly irregular, but there was something striking about her appearance. Although her mother was an American, her father was Greek, and she possessed a strong hint of Middle-Eastern features. With her command of Turkish, she was able to pass for a native when the need arose.

But Robby's blonde hair and complexion were too light for that. This year, his skin had been even lighter since he was spending most of his time underground and hadn't acquired his usual tan. His skin was pale and Alex kidded him—she kidded him about a lot of things—that he looked like an American tourist. But he was also fluent in Turkish and able to avoid many of the problems that Westerners encountered when traveling in the remoteness of Asia Minor.

He watched her slender fingers adjust the strobe and set the digital camera. She punched

a test button. The flash revealed little more than dirt in the darkness.

"There doesn't seem to be much in the entrance," Robby said. He glanced at the ceiling. "Don't go in any deeper. You should be safe back here."

"I'm waiting for the GPS to calibrate," she said.

The GPS satellites, at an altitude of 12000 miles, would normally measure the camera's location with an accuracy of 1 meter horizontally, but in this case it was augmented with ground reference stations placed around the site to improve the accuracy for archaeological purposes. The location of the camera, of objects within the tomb, of the twists and turns of winding tunnels would be recorded with an accuracy of less than an inch, both vertically and horizontally.

Robby needed to get out of Alex's way while she snapped the photos. Her skill with the digital camera and GPS equipment was one of many reasons he admired her so much.

"See you outside," Robby said, and headed down the corridor toward the main opening. The lamp on his helmet had grown dim, and he felt his way along the walls until the light from the entrance made the going easier.

In a few seconds the tunnel entrance came into view, framing a dark silhouette that stood in the way, arms folded like some ancient Sultan's bodyguard. Robby recognized Ekrem, the Turkish archaeologist assigned to the expedition. Two tiny eyes peered at him from beneath bushy black eyebrows that met at the nose. Robby pressed his arm against the tablet in his pocket, slowed his pace, and tried to appear casual, ignoring the intensity of Ekrem's stare and passing him without a word. Ekrem had never approved of foreign archaeologists on Turkish sites, and Robby spent much of his time trying to avoid the petty confrontations that Ekrem provoked.

The shaft of light that shattered the cool darkness was even more dazzling on the outside. Robby paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust and then stepped from the gloom into the clear light of the Anatolian sun. Before him lay the rolling, treeless hills of Asia Minor. Sparse bushes and twisted scrub dotted the barren landscape. The land dropped gently into a shallow valley in front of the tunnel, and it was here that the tents had been erected. A strong smell of camel assaulted his nostrils. A dozen villages busied themselves attending the animals, cooking, and assisting the members of the expedition. The wind shifted and the camel smell was replaced with the spicy odor of cooking.

He started down the hill, knowing that Ekrem was still watching. He could feel the cold stare like a thin blade in his back.

Then he heard it. The one sound that everyone on an expedition dreads. The soft *whoosh* of a cave-in.

He wheeled and sprinted back up the hill. When he reached the entrance to the tunnel, Ekrem grabbed his arm and tried to prevent him from going in. Robby shook him off and shouted into his astonished face:

"Get the diggers!"

In another instant, he was in the tunnel, plunging ahead into dark clouds of dust.

"Alex!" he screamed, turning the volume on his headset all the way up.

No answer.

Dust filled his eyes, blinded him. The walls of the tunnel narrowed and made the going easier. He groped his way along with both arms.

Abruptly, the passage came to a halt and his feet dug into a wall of loose soil that filled the end of the tunnel. He fell to his knees, and clawed blindly at the dirt. Almost immediately, his hands struck something soft.

He knew it was Alex.

He scraped and flung away the loose dirt, uncovering her head and shoulders. His fingers traced her long, tangled hair. She was face down. With any luck, there would be a small air pocket under her face. He lifted her head.

"Alex? Are you OK? Can you hear me?"

Her only answer was a dry, choking cough, but he was happy to hear even that. Her lamp was gone, buried somewhere, and he still couldn't see. A rain of soil and gravel pelted his head, and he knew he couldn't wait for the diggers. He dug frantically, clearing away as much dirt as he could, satisfying himself that she wasn't pinned beneath anything more solid than the loose soil.

Then he dragged her free of the debris.

Alex coughed again and her breath came in short, quick gasps. The dirt falling from above covered her face as quickly as he could brush it away, and he realized she was suffocating. Robby found it difficult to breathe himself, even with his head bent down.

Dragging Alex and gagging on the dusty air, he backed as fast as possible, trying to remember how the tunnel twisted so he wouldn't collide with the rocky sides.

His lungs and throat ached with the effort. Just as he thought he wouldn't be able to inhale another breath full of dust, strong arms pulled him from behind and he saw other figures in the dim reddish light from the mouth of the tunnel. Someone turned him toward the light and a moment later he was carrying Alex out into the morning sun.

He sat with her for a few minutes on the rocky ground while they both recovered from the choking effects of the dust. Then he moved her limbs gently and asked her to wiggle her toes and fingers. Nothing was broken. The Turkish diggers who had helped them out were surveying the damage in the tunnel.

Alex said nothing, but Robby guessed her thoughts from the way she squeezed his arm as she sat next to him with her head on his shoulder. Then she tilted her head back and looked at him. Her eyes conveyed an expression of gratitude that no words could phrase.

"I guess we better get cleaned up," Robby said, feeling suddenly embarrassed. He helped her to her feet and they started down the hill toward their tents. "The diggers can rescue your camera."

"The old man's going to shoot you," Alex said, between coughs. She stopped to scoop up her laptop and the camera case.

At any other time what bothered him most was the way she teased him mercilessly, but now he knew it meant she was recovering from the shock of the accident.

"Do you still have the tablet?" she asked.

He reached for the pocket that held his prize and discovered that the flap had been pushed inside and the pocket was full of dirt. Worse, one corner of the tablet glittered in the sun. He covered it quickly.

"Damn," he said, "I wonder if Ekrem saw it."

"I told you not to steal it."

"I'm not stealing it. Anyway, look who's talking. Half the stuff in your tent was stolen from school."

"I never took anything valuable, just old stuff they would have thrown away. Eventually."

"When was the last time we saw him?"

"Who?"

"Ekrem."

"I didn't notice," she said. "It's a good thing the old man is in town buying supplies. You won't have to face him until later."

"I wish you wouldn't call Dr. Richardson 'the old man'. It isn't right."

"You don't have to worry about me, Robby Carter. I won't tell anyone you're a thief." She shook her hand in his hair, producing a cloud of yellow dust.

"Stop it."

"You're really dirty. You look like one of the diggers."

"You can shower first," Robby said, remembering that a single shower served the three Americans in the camp.

"Thanks," Alex said. "What's Mira making for dinner tonight?"

"Hungry?"

"Starved."

Now he was certain she had recovered. "Get going. I want to hide this thing before someone sees it.

"You can have a closer look at it but I want to see it on the *new finds* table by noon tomorrow. Understand?"

She disappeared into her tent.

"Let me know when you're through with the shower. And don't use all the water."

The only reply was a short laugh from behind the canvas.

He hurried to his own tent and tied the door closed, finding the compulsion to hide the tablet stronger than ever. He knew Alex wouldn't say anything about it, so it was entirely up to him when to announce the find. But how could he explain his actions to Dr. Richardson? Robby knew he wasn't supposed to pluck artifacts from the ground without recording their location on film. On top of everything else, poking about in the tunnel may have caused the cave-in. And what if Ekrem or one of the other workers saw the tablet in his coat pocket?

As he pulled off his clothes, he considered the consequences carefully. Already, he had come dangerously close to violating international agreements and Turkish law by concealing the tablet from Ekrem, the Turkish archaeologist appointed to represent the interests of the government in Ankara. Ekrem claimed he was only there to police the dig and prevent the theft of valuable antiquities by unscrupulous foreigners, but Robby didn't trust him.

"Damn," he thought, "even my underpants are full of dirt." He pulled on a robe, picked up his dusty jacket, and slid the tablet from the pocket. Sitting on the edge of his cot, he puzzled over the message inscribed across the ruddy surface. As he tried to translate some of the characters, he found that the sheer artistry of the tablet overwhelmed his efforts to coldly decipher the meaning, as if its beauty was purposefully designed to keep anyone from violating its secrets.

For a moment, he thought he heard someone just outside his tent. Could Alex have returned from the shower already? Perhaps she was playing one of her tricks.

He stuffed the tablet underneath his jacket and peered out the tent door. Seeing no one, he retied the door and sat down. Afraid of losing the tablet permanently to the Turks, he picked up his notebook and made a precise copy of the message, transcribing each character onto the lined paper. This done, he felt relieved.

Turning the tablet over, he studied the disc and concentric circles set on the other side. He made a rough sketch of the design. The border seemed somewhat irrelevant at first, a repeating series of shapes resembling a flame, but he finally copied one small section of it,

remembering that no part of an ancient inscription should be taken for granted. Finally, he concealed the notebook and tablet in separate places. He wanted time to study the tablet at his own leisure, and verify some of the unfamiliar markings. He decided to show it to Ekrem and Dr. Richardson later.

Flopping back on his cot, he waited for Alex to finish her shower. The sounds of the camp, the sharp noises of busy men and women, came through the canvas. He couldn't shake the feeling of guilt that hung over him.