
THE CARTER SECRETS
SHADOWS OF HISTORY
THE ETHIOPIAN MANUSCRIPT
RADIM KAUFMANN

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The Ethiopian Manuscript

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THE CARTER SECRETS: SHADOWS OF HISTORY
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For all the seekers of hidden truths,
and the keepers who guard them.

And for my family,
who believed in this story from the beginning.



Rhea with Robert and Eleanor Carter
Boston, 1995

PROLOGUE

Vienna, 1947



The archive was closing.

Dr. Elias Varga gathered his notes with trembling hands, acutely aware of the security guard's impatient gaze burning into his back. Three months of research, six countries, and countless dead ends-all leading to this moment,

this room, this discovery.

The manuscript lay before him on the reading desk.

Ge'ez script. Fourth century, possibly earlier. Hidden in the private collection of a Habsburg prince who had died during the war, his treasures scattered to archives across Europe.

Elias had been searching for this text for fifteen years.

And now, holding it in his hands, he understood why it had been hidden.

"The light that burns must be divided," the text read. *"The power that consumes must be scattered. Let the keepers guard what the world cannot hold. Let them wait in silence until the time of gathering."*

Time of gathering.

The phrase sent ice through his veins.

"Five minutes, Dr. Varga," the guard called.

Five minutes to decide what to do with knowledge that could change everything.

Elias made his choice.

He copied the key passages-quickly, carefully, memorizing what he couldn't transcribe. Then he closed the manuscript and returned it to the librarian with a smile that revealed nothing.

That night, he booked passage to Ethiopia.

Three weeks later, he vanished.

His daughter, Margaret, would spend the next forty years searching for what he had found.

And her student-a young historian named Rhea Morrison-would eventually finish what Elias had started.

Some discoveries take generations to complete.

Some secrets require more than one lifetime to keep.

And some journeys, once begun, cannot be abandoned-only inherited.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

The Ethiopian Manuscript



Boston, Autumn 2017

Rhea Carter had learned, over the years, to distrust moments that announced themselves.

Real discoveries did not arrive with urgency. They came quietly, almost apologetically, as if hoping not to be noticed. They waited for the one person who knew how to look without wanting to own.

She was thinking about that as she walked through Harvard Yard, the October morning crisp with the kind of cold that made her think of ancient libraries and mountain monasteries. Students hurried past, heads down, earbuds in, oblivious to the weight of history that pressed up through the cobblestones beneath their feet.

They don't feel it, she thought. *They walk on centuries and never notice.*

But Rhea noticed. She always had.

It was why she'd become a historian. Not for the facts-facts were easy, boring, dead on arrival. She'd become a historian for the *gaps*. The silences between documented events. The moments when the record went blank and something happened that no one wanted to remember.

Those gaps were where the truth lived.

And today, she was about to fall into one.

* * *

The Widener Library rose before her, its columns severe and certain, its steps worn smooth by decades of scholarly feet. Rhea climbed them slowly, savoring the anticipation that hummed beneath her skin.

Three years.

Three years of following a single thread-a footnote in an obscure 1932 journal, a reference to "uncataloged Ge'ez material" that had led her through archives in Vienna, London, and Rome. Three years of dead ends and polite dismissals, of colleagues who suggested she was chasing ghosts, of conference panels where senior scholars had called her theories "romantic folklore dressed in academic language."

She'd almost given up twice.

And then, last week, an email from a contact in the rare books department:

Dr. Carter, I think I've found something that matches your description. Nineteenth-century binding, uncataloged, no digital record. It's been in storage since 1947. Would you like to examine it?

Would she like to examine it.

She'd booked the appointment before finishing the email.

* * *

The archive room was colder than the corridor outside-not unpleasant, but intentional. Controlled. The kind of cold designed to slow time rather than preserve comfort.

Paper liked it this way. Ink too. Silence most of all.

"You have exactly two hours," the archivist said without looking up, his pen scratching across a ledger older than the university itself. *"No photography. No removal of materials."*

Rhea offered a polite smile.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

That part was mostly true.

The door closed behind her with a sound that was not loud, but final. The lock clicked once, a small punctuation mark at the end of the ordinary world.

Rhea stood still for a moment, letting her eyes adjust.

The university archive was not impressive. That was its strength. No grand reading tables, no dramatic lighting. Just shelves, drawers, catalog numbers, and the quiet confidence of a place that knew it would outlast curiosity, fashion, even truth itself.

She moved toward the desk prepared for her, setting her bag down carefully. Inside it were notebooks bound in leather, pencils sharpened to fine points, a folded list of references she had chased for years without success.

At the top of the list was a single line, underlined twice:

Uncataloged Ge'ez material - indirect reference, 1932.

And there, waiting for her on the desk:

The volume.

* * *

It was unremarkable at first glance.

A nineteenth-century binding, cracked leather darkened by age, faded gold lettering barely legible along the spine. It had not been requested in decades. Possibly longer. Its call number was handwritten on a slip tucked inside the front cover-no digital record, no accession date.

Someone wanted it forgotten, she thought. *Or protected.*

Rhea turned the first pages slowly.

She had learned never to rush the opening. Old books remembered how they were treated. They held grudges against careless hands.

Latin. Marginalia in a dry, competent hand. Footnotes referencing ecclesiastical councils long dissolved. Nothing unexpected.

Page after page of unremarkable scholarship.

And then-

Something resisted her fingers.

Not a page.

Something *between* pages.

She stopped.

Her pulse quickened-not with excitement, but with recognition. The subtle certainty that something was about to change, whether she wanted it to or not.

Rhea slid the object free.

* * *

It was a folded manuscript leaf.

Thin and fragile, the parchment darker than the book that had hidden it-older, denser, smelling faintly of myrrh and desert wind. The script was immediately wrong for its surroundings-angular, deliberate, written in Ge'ez with early diacritical marks she hadn't seen outside of Aksumite fragments.

Her breath caught.

"That's not possible," she whispered.

She knew this script.

She had spent fifteen years learning its variations, its regional hands, its quiet evolution through centuries of faith and isolation. She could distinguish a 5th-century monastic hand from a 7th-century scribal revision by the curve of a single character.

This was *early*.

Older than it should be.

And it did not belong here.

Rhea glanced instinctively toward the door, half-expecting someone to be watching. The archive remained still, the shelves indifferent, the air thick with the weight of unread histories.

She unfolded the leaf carefully, supporting it with both hands as if it might dissolve into memory.

* * *

The text was incomplete-fragmentary-but unmistakable.

References to a custodial lineage, phrased obliquely, as if written for someone who already understood what was being described.

Mentions of "the light that must not see the sky."

Of "guardians who walk in silence."

Of a place "where stone remembers what men forget."

A line near the center made her stop breathing altogether.

Non ad ostentationem. Sed ad custodiam.

Not for display. But for keeping.

Her hand trembled slightly.

She had seen that phrase before.

Not here. Not in this language.

But in a footnote. A dismissed reference in a 1947 journal. A single sentence in a long-forgotten paper written by Dr. Elias Varga, a Hungarian scholar who had vanished in Addis Ababa in 1951, leaving behind only a locked trunk and a daughter who later became Rhea's mentor.

He found it too, she realized. *And it cost him everything.*

* * *

The archive clock ticked quietly above the door.

One hour remaining.

Rhea forced herself to take notes slowly, deliberately, as if nothing unusual were happening. Her pen moved across the page, recording catalog details, condition notes, chain of custody-even though there was no chain.

Inside her chest, everything accelerated.

This is real.

This is actually real.

She copied the key phrases, her handwriting steady through sheer force of will. She sketched the layout of the text, noted the faded symbols in the margins-symbols she recognized from another context entirely.

Three interlocking arcs.

A circle woven through.

The same symbol that appeared in her family's Boston basement.

The same symbol her mother-in-law had shown her on her wedding day.

"There are things we guard," Eleanor Carter had said, her voice soft with the weight of generations. *"Things that must be protected, even if we never understand them."*

Rhea had thought she understood.

She'd been wrong.

Whatever the Carters had been protecting for two hundred years-it was connected to this. To Ethiopia. To manuscripts that shouldn't exist and scholars who vanished without trace.

The thread she'd been following wasn't just academic.

It was personal.

It was *family*.

* * *

That evening, the Carter brownstone on Joy Street was warm with ordinary life.

The house stood just off Beacon Hill, one of those buildings that wore its age without apology. Thick walls. Narrow staircases. Floors that creaked not from weakness, but from memory.

Rhea had always loved that about it-the sense that the house held its breath when important things happened.

Thomas's voice drifted down from his studio on the second floor, speaking into a headset as he worked through a design problem.

"The beam can't support that span without reinforcement," he was saying, voice calm, certain. *"Not in a structure this old."*

Rhea paused in the doorway, listening.

Architecture calmed her. It was honest in a way history often was not. Buildings didn't lie. They settled, cracked, leaned-but they never pretended to be something they weren't.

In the kitchen, Lenna sat at the table, homework spread out in disciplined chaos. She looked up immediately, eyes sharp.

"You're late," she said.

"Archives don't keep time," Rhea replied, hanging her coat.

Mira, curled on the window seat with a book she wasn't reading, glanced up.

"Did you find anything?"

Rhea hesitated, meeting Lenna's gaze. There was something in her daughter's eyes-a knowing, a quiet alertness-that hadn't been there a month ago.

"Maybe," she said. *"But maybe is all you ever get at first."*

Lenna tilted her head, studying her mother with the unnerving precision that had begun to emerge lately.

"That's the face you make when you're pretending not to think," she said.

Rhea laughed softly, ruffling her daughter's hair.

"Eat your dinner."

But as she turned away, she caught Lenna's expression-not disappointed, not curious.

Knowing.

As if her daughter understood exactly what Rhea had found.

And was waiting to see what she would do about it.

* * *

Later, as the house settled into evening quiet, Rhea stood alone in her bedroom.

The manuscript lay on the desk beneath a shaded lamp. She had already copied it twice, comparing forms, noting anomalies, cross-referencing with digitized fragments from Debre Damo and Lalibela.

It was real.

And it was dangerous.

Not because of what it said-but because of what it implied: a network of guardians, a hidden artifact, a truth too volatile for daylight.

She picked up her phone and typed a message to her oldest academic contact-a man who had taught her that some discoveries required discretion.

Bernhard, I need you to look at something. Discreetly. It can't exist, and yet it does.

The reply came minutes later.

You always say that. Send it.

She hesitated, then sent the images-blurred enough to protect, clear enough to verify.

And then she sat in the darkness, waiting for the world to change.

It didn't take long.

CHAPTER TWO

The Text That Should Not Exist



Boston, Autumn 2017

Rhea did not return the manuscript to the archive immediately.

That, too, was a decision.

She justified it to herself in professional terms-verification required context; context required time-but she knew better. Some objects resisted being placed back into silence once they had been noticed. They clung to attention like burrs to wool, unwilling to be forgotten again.

The manuscript lay on her desk the next morning, unchanged, as if daring her to pretend it had been a dream.

Sunlight slanted through the window, catching dust motes above its surface, but the parchment itself remained cool, inert, watchful.

You've been hiding for a long time, Rhea thought. *And now you've been found.*

The question was: by whom?

By chance, which would mean nothing?

Or by design, which would mean everything?

* * *

The house was quiet.

Thomas had taken the girls to school. The soft click of the front door still echoed faintly in the stairwell, a reminder that ordinary life continued whether or not history chose to misbehave.

Rhea poured herself coffee she did not want and sat down.

She began with the catalog.

The archive's digital system was efficient, conservative, and deeply uninterested in anomalies. Rhea navigated it with the ease of long familiarity, entering accession numbers, cross-referencing donors, scanning acquisition histories.

First under the book's title.

Then its donor.

Then its shelf mark.

Nothing.

The book that had contained the manuscript existed. Its provenance was clear, boring even. Donated in 1894 by a Boston merchant named Elias Winthrop, who had traveled extensively in the Mediterranean but never-according to any record she could find-set foot in Africa.

No irregularities.

No missing items.

No gaps in the inventory.

The manuscript itself did not exist.

Not in the database.

Not in the physical log.

Not even in the marginalia of the archivist's notes.

Rhea leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling, where cracks formed a map only the house understood.

"You don't just appear," she said aloud. *"Someone put you there."*

But who?

And when?

And why hide it in a book that no one had requested in decades?

* * *

She returned to the text.

This time, she read it not as a historian parsing dates and dialects, but as a reader of intent-of silences, of omissions, of what was carefully left unsaid.

The phrasing was careful-almost evasive.

Names were avoided.

Places hinted at but never fixed.

Dates were given in relation to celestial events ("after the red star faded") rather than imperial calendars.

It was a style she recognized immediately: writing meant to survive discovery without inviting it. A language of shadows.

The more she read, the clearer the pattern became.

This was not theology.

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