Lovereading.co.uk

The Sacred Cut

David Hewson

Published by Pan Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

PROLOGUE

It was nine months now since she'd slipped out of Iraq, six hundred dollars in her pocket, knowing instinctively what she needed: men who owned boats and trucks, men who knew the way to places she'd only dimly heard of and who could take a little human contraband there for the right price. There'd been no work, no money at home, not since Saddam's soldiers came from Baghdad and took her father away, leaving them alone together in the damp, cold shack that passed as a farm, with its dying crops, wilting under the oil smoke of the fields outside Kirkuk.

She'd watched the dry, dusty lane that led to their home every day for hours, waiting for him to come back, wondering when she'd hear that strong, confident adult voice again, bringing hope and security into their lives. It never happened. Instead, her mother went slowly crazy as the hope ran out, wailing at the open door for hours on end, not cleaning anything, not even talking after a while.

No one liked crazy people. No one liked the decisions they forced on others. One day a distant relative came and took both of them away, drove them for hours

in a cart behind an old, stumbling donkey, then left them with an old aunt on the other side of the plumes of smoke. Just another tin shack, no money, too many mouths to feed. Her mother was completely silent after that, spent hours with her arms wrapped around herself, rocking constantly. No one talked to them much either. They only took her to school every other day: there was too much work to be done trying to dig a living out of the desiccated fields. Then soldiers came and the school closed for good. She'd watched as boxes of shells got shifted into the classrooms and wondered how she was supposed to learn anything ever again.

Over all their lives now, bigger than the oil cloud and blacker too, hung the threat of war. The family men said there'd been one before, when she was tiny. But this war would be different. This one would end matters, once and for all, make the Kurds free forever in a new kind of Iraq. They told a lot of lies. Either that or they just got things wrong. Men were stupid sometimes, anyway.

It was February when the soldiers came to occupy the farm. They were Iraqis. They behaved the way Iraqi soldiers did around Kurds. When they wanted something to eat, they came into the house and took it. When they wanted other comforts, other services, they took them too. She was scared. She was full of an internal fury too real and violent to share. She wanted to escape from this place, go somewhere new, anywhere, so long as it was in the West, where life was easier. There was no point in staying. There'd been gossip when they'd tried to sell what little produce they had in the neighbouring village one morning. About how the Iraqis killed the Kurdish men they took, put them down like animals. These whispered tales of horror turned a

key in her head. Her father was dead. She'd never hear the comforting boom of his voice again. She understood now why her mother had retreated to some inner hell where no one could reach her.

So throughout each long day, as it became more and more dangerous to travel, she sat in the corner of the squalid little shack and listened to the frightened talk around her. About death and war and uncertainty, and always, always, how more soldiers would come. Peshmurga. Americans. British. Men who would, she knew, look much the same as the Iraqis when she stared into their eyes. They would sound different, wear different uniforms, but they were just men, mortal men, bringing death and chaos along with them, invisible, ghostly comrades riding in the dun-coloured jeeps.

It happened on a cold, clear April day. The Iraqis had made themselves a position next to the dank waters of the dead fish pond, by the puny patch of feeble squash plants, blackened by oil smog, at the end of their lane. Five men and a big gun pointed at the sky. They were worse than most: vicious, foul-mouthed, dangerous. Scared men, too, and she knew why. They had just the one shell, nothing more. They were sitting there, wondering how to give themselves up before the Americans came and killed them.

In the middle of the afternoon she'd watched as an ugly dark plane circled the farm, like an old metal bird wondering where to lay down its feet. She'd felt nothing, not even fear for herself. She'd stood outside the shack, ignoring the screams from behind ordering her to hide, watching the fire streak from the black bird's belly, race through the beautiful blue sky and wrap itself around the upright cylinder of the gun

before the Iraqis even had a chance to spit back their single shell.

It sent the soldiers screaming out of their sandbagged home, flames licking at their contorted bodies. She wanted to see more, wanted to make sure this memory stayed with her because it was important. So she walked closer, hid in the stinking outside toilet, looking on through the battered palm thatching as they danced and rolled on the ground.

Even now, nearly a year on, she remembered what she'd thought at that moment. The sight reminded her of the travelling troupe of clowns who used to come through the village from time to time, back when her father was alive. He always took her. One of her earliest memories was of being in his arms, watching them, almost hysterical with laughter. Even so, she was aware that there was something wrong when they returned again and again, something cruel in their humour, in the way it exaggerated the stupidity and pain of existence and invited their audience to be amused by it. She had thought about laughing at the soldiers trying to save themselves from the flames that fought to consume their bodies. There were plenty of reasons to. The Kurds hated the Iraqis. The Iraqis hated the Kurds. Everyone hated the Americans. It was a world defined by hatred and perhaps that was, in the end, why people laughed at all, because it made the pain go away, if only for a little while.

But she didn't have the time to stare at them, try to find some amusement in their throes. At that moment Laila was thinking of herself, sure that hatred was a luxury she'd have to save for later. Somewhere here there had to be the chance of escape. Of fleeing this

dying, parched land where there was nothing left for her any more, no love and no hope.

When the flames died down she walked over to the men. They were dead, contorted husks now, partly charred by the fire that had spat at them from the sky. Except for one. He clung on doggedly, trying to breathe through cracked, ruined lips, each attempt coming with pained effort. She thought he wouldn't last much longer. So she slid her hand inside his jacket, staring all the time into his bright, frightened eyes. He mumbled something, a familiar insult, something about thieving Kurds. Then she found the envelope and he started to sob like a child.

This shocked her. She'd stared at him, affronted, and spoke in good Arabic, since she made a point of learning as many languages as possible in the old school which was now gone, books replaced by munitions boxes. 'You should go to God like a man. Not a child.'

Then she took everything she could from him, documents, coins, a pen, a watch, reasoning they would do a dead man no good anyway, and that a world in this condition could scarcely condemn a petty thief.

He must have been rich. Maybe a member of the party. He had close to $1,500 in mixed notes in an envelope. When she checked the other corpses, carefully prising away the burnt uniforms from the flesh beneath, she found more. Some were charred but they were dollars, the magical currency, and you could buy things just by waving the curled, brown sheets at someone. A man at a border post, say. Or the village elder – and there always was one – who knew the way out, the way West, where the rich people lived.

*

She was down to three hundred dollars by the time she got to Istanbul two weeks later. It was a strange and beautiful place, one that scared her because of the hard way people looked into her face whenever she begged in the street.

Most of the remaining money disappeared with the series of random trucks she took through Greece then along the Adriatic coast, through Albania, Montenegro and Croatia, past a shining spring sea, past lush green fields of vines and vegetables. And wrecked buildings slowly being brought back to life. She could speak a little Italian. It was the one European language the school had taught simply because it was the only one for which they had the books. She loved the sound, too, and the pictures on the pages, of a distant city where the streets and squares had beautiful names, beautiful buildings.

The locals on the coast knew Italian. It was a language from the West, worth understanding in the hope its good fortune might touch you one day. She talked to them a little, knew the signs, understood the looks in some of the old men's faces. There'd been a war here as well.

She gave the last hundred dollars to a burly German, who drove her over the border into Italy at Trieste, and left her, two days later, penniless, on the outskirts of Rome.

The money hadn't covered everything. Somewhere along the way – she wasn't sure of the day, it hadn't seemed important to keep track of the time – she'd turned thirteen. She knew about ways to keep men happy, and tried to tell herself it was easy when you lay there to think of something else: poppies waving in the

yellow corn, bread baking over burning wood, pictures of the unknown city now a few kilometres away, with its lovely buildings, its wealth, its promise of safety and happiness. And the sound of her father's voice, singing in the fields. That was the warmest memory, one that she prayed would never disappear.

And when it was over, when he'd let her out of the cab on some grim housing estate in the suburbs, a place of dark, threatening streets, – nothing like the Rome she'd imagined – she'd made a decision. Stealing was better than this. Stealing allowed her a little personal dignity. It would keep her alive until . . . what?

Back on that warm day in early summer she hadn't known the answer. Now, in December, with the city shivering under a vicious and unexpected burst of snow, she was no closer to it. Each day was a new battle fought using the same weapons: keen eyes, agile hands. The charities had thrown her out for stealing. The street people rejected her because she wouldn't stoop to the tricks they used – selling themselves, selling dope. She was a world away from a home that no longer existed, alone in an empty piazza in the heart of Rome, looking at something that could only be a temple, one almost as old as some of those back in the place she now struggled to think of as home.

She'd followed the man all the way from the narrow street near the Spanish Steps, after she saw him leave a doorway next to a small store selling Gucci. He looked interesting somehow. The right type. So she'd followed him, and it wasn't easy. He kept ducking out of the way as if he was hiding too. Then she lost him again, turned

the corner, found herself in the square. The temple was a kind of sanctuary, she thought.

The girl stared at the huge doors shut tightly against the freezing blast and wondered what the place was like inside.

A sanctuary could be warm. It could have something to steal.

She walked along to the side of the building, under the shadow of the gigantic pillars and the curious writing above them, down a low path towards the light in a narrow side entrance.

The door was just ajar. Snow was dancing around her like a wraith caught in the hushed breath of a newborn storm. She walked into a small, modern cubicle, which led into the dark, airy interior beyond, hearing voices. A man and a woman, foreign, American probably, were making sounds she didn't quite understand.

She was cold. She was curious. She slunk into the shadows, somewhat in awe of the building's size and majesty, slid behind a fluted column, then let her eyes adjust to the scene in the centre, lit by the moon falling through a giant, open disc at the focal point of the roof.

Close by, thrown on a bench, lay a man's coat and jacket. They looked good quality. There could be any amount of money in there, enough to see her through until the snow disappeared.

The two people inside were some distance away. The woman's clothes were strewn across the geometric stone pattern of the floor. She lay naked in the very centre of the hall. Quite still now, her arms and legs outstretched in an odd, artificial manner, as if each limb were pointing to an invisible angle somewhere in the circular building.

It was wrong to watch. Laila understood that, but her mind fought to interpret what was happening in front of her in the icy, airy heart of this strange, dead place. She thought she had seen everything the world had to offer back in Iraq. Then something caught the moonlight. Something sharp and silver and terrifying, a slender line of surgical metal, hovering over the figure on the floor. And she knew she was mistaken.