Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Sanctus

Written by Simon Toyne

Published by HarperCollins

All text is copyright © of the author

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

SANCTUS

SIMON TOYNE



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2011
1

Copyright © Simon Toyne 2011

Map used as endpaper © John Gilkes 2011

Simon Toyne asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-739155-4

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Minion

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-1806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

To K
For the adventure

I

A man is a god in ruins

Ralph Waldo Emerson

1

A flash of light filled his skull as it struck the rock floor.

Then darkness.

He was dimly aware of the heavy oak door banging shut behind him and a thick batten sliding through iron hasps.

For a while he lay where he'd been thrown, listening to the pounding of his pulse and the mournful wind close by.

The blow to his head made him feel sick and dizzy, but there was no danger he was going to pass out; the agonizing cold would see to that. It was a still and ancient cold, immutable and unforgiving as the stone the cell was carved from. It pressed down and wrapped itself round him like a shroud, freezing the tears on his cheeks and beard, chilling the blood that trickled from the fresh cuts he himself had inflicted on his exposed upper body during the ceremony. Pictures tumbled through his mind, images of the awful scenes he had just witnessed and of the terrible secret he had learned.

It was the culmination of a lifetime of searching. The end of a journey he had hoped would lead to a sacred and ancient knowledge, to a divine understanding that would bring him closer to God. Now at long last he had gained that knowledge, but he had found no divinity in what he had seen, only unimaginable sorrow.

Where was God in this?

The tears stung fresh and the cold sank deeper into his body, tightening its grip on his bones. He heard something on the other

side of the heavy door. A distant sound. One that had somehow managed to find its way up through the honeycomb of hand-carved tunnels which riddled the holy mountain.

They'll come for me soon.

The ceremony will end. Then they will deal with me . . .

He knew the history of the order he had joined. He knew their savage rules – and now he knew their secret. They'd kill him for sure. Probably slowly, in front of his former brothers, a reminder of the seriousness of their collective, uncompromising vows: a warning of what would happen if you broke them.

No!

Not here. Not like this.

He pressed his head against the cold stone floor then pushed himself up on all fours. Slowly and painfully he dragged the rough green material of his cassock back over his shoulders, the coarse wool scouring the raw wounds on his arms and chest. He pulled the cowl over his head and collapsed once more, feeling his warm breath through his beard, drawing his knees tightly under his chin and lying clenched in the foetal position until the warmth began to return to the rest of his body.

More noises echoed from somewhere within the mountain.

He opened his eyes and began to focus. A faint glow of distant light shone through a narrow window just enough to pick out the principal features of his cell. It was unadorned, rough-hewn, functional. A pile of rubble lay strewn across one corner, showing it was one of the hundreds of rooms no longer regularly used or maintained in the Citadel.

He glanced back at the window; little more than a slit in the rock, a loophole carved countless generations earlier to give archers a vantage point over enemy armies approaching across the plains below. He rose stiffly to his feet and made his way towards it.

Dawn was still some way off. There was no moon, just distant stars. Nevertheless when he looked through the window the sudden glare was enough to make him squint. It came from the

combined light of tens of thousands of street lamps, advertising hoardings and shop signs stretching out far below him towards the rim of distant mountains surrounding the plain on all sides. It was the fierce and constant glow of the modern city of Ruin, once the capital of the Hittite Empire, now just a tourist destination in southern Turkey, on the furthest edge of Europe.

He looked down at the metropolitan sprawl, the world he had turned his back on eight years previously in his quest for truth, a quest that had led him to this lofty, ancient prison and a discovery that had torn apart his soul.

Another muffled sound. Closer this time.

He had to be quick.

He unthreaded the rope belt from the leather loops of his cassock. With a practised dexterity he twisted each end into a noose then stepped to the window and leaned through, feeling the frozen rock face for a crag or outcrop that might hold his weight. At the highest point of the opening he found a curved protrusion, slipped one noose around it and leaned back, tightening it, testing its strength.

It held.

Tucking his long, dirty blonde hair behind his ears he gazed down one last time at the carpet of light pulsating beneath him. Then, his heart heavy from the weight of the ancient secret he now carried, he breathed out as far as his lungs would allow, squeezed through the narrow gap, and launched himself into the night.

2

Nine floors down, in a room as grand and ornate as the previous one was meagre and bare, another man delicately washed the blood from his own freshly made cuts.

He knelt in front of a cavernous fireplace, as if in prayer. His long hair and beard were silvered with age and the hair on top of his head was thin, giving him a naturally monastic air in keeping with the green cassock gathered about his waist.

His body, though stooped with the first hint of age, was still solid and sinewy. Taut muscles moved beneath his skin as he dipped his square of muslin methodically into the copper bowl beside him, gently squeezing out the cool water before dabbing his weeping flesh. He held the poultice in place for a few moments each time, then repeated the ritual.

When the cuts on his neck, arms and torso had started to heal he patted himself dry with fresh, soft towels and rose, carefully pulling his habit back over his head, feeling the strangely comforting sting of his wounds beneath the coarse material. He closed his pale grey eyes, the colour of parched stone, and took a deep breath. He always felt a profound sense of calm immediately after the ceremony, a sense of satisfaction that he was upholding the greatest tradition of his ancient order. He tried to savour it for as long as possible before his temporal responsibilities dragged him back to the earthbound realities of his office.

A timid knock on the door disturbed this reverie.

Tonight his beatific mood was obviously going to be short-lived.

'Enter.' He reached for the rope belt draped over the back of a nearby chair.

The door opened, catching the light from the crackling fire on its carved and gilded surface. A monk slipped silently into the room, gently closing the door behind him. He too wore the green cassock and long hair and beard of their ancient order.

'Brother Abbot . . .' His voice was low, almost conspiratorial. 'Forgive my intrusion at this late hour – but I thought you should know immediately.'

He dropped his gaze and studied the floor, as if uncertain how to continue.

'Then tell me *immediately*,' growled the Abbot, tying the belt round his waist and tucking in his Crux – a wooden cross in the shape of the letter 'T'.

'We have lost Brother Samuel . . .'

The Abbot froze.

'What do you mean, "lost"? Has he died?'

'No, Brother Abbot. I mean . . . he is not in his cell.'

The Abbot's hand tightened on the hilt of his Crux until the grain of the wood pressed into his palm. Then, as logic quickly allayed his immediate fears, he relaxed once more.

'He must have jumped,' he said. 'Have the grounds searched and the body retrieved before it is discovered.'

He turned and adjusted his cassock, expecting the man to hurry from the room.

'Forgive me, Brother Abbot,' the monk continued, staring more intently at the floor, 'but we have already conducted a thorough search. We informed Brother Athanasius the moment we discovered Samuel was missing. He made contact with the outside and they instigated a sweep of the lower foundations. There's no sign of a body.'

The calmness the Abbot had enjoyed just a few minutes previously had now entirely evaporated.

Earlier that night Brother Samuel had been inducted into the Sancti, the inner circle of their order; a brotherhood so secret only those living within the cloistered halls of the mountain knew of its continued existence. The initiation had been carried out in the traditional manner, finally revealing to the groomed monk the ancient Sacrament, the holy secret their order had been formed to protect and maintain. Brother Samuel had demonstrated during the ceremony that he was not equal to this knowledge. It was not the first time a monk had been found wanting at the moment of revelation. The secret they were bound to keep was powerful and dangerous, and no matter how thoroughly the newcomer had been prepared, when the moment came it was sometimes simply too much. Regrettably, someone who possessed the knowledge but could not carry the burden of it was almost as dangerous as the secret itself. At such times it was safer, perhaps even kinder, to end that person's anguish as quickly as possible.

Brother Samuel had been such a case.

Now he had gone missing.

As long as he was at liberty, the Sacrament was vulnerable.

'Find him,' the Abbot said. 'Search the grounds again, dig them up if you have to, but find him.'

'Yes, Brother Abbot.'

'Unless a host of angels passed by and took pity on his wretched soul he must have fallen and he must have fallen nearby. And if he *hasn't* fallen then he must be somewhere in the Citadel. So secure every exit and conduct a room-by-room sweep of every crumbling battlement and bricked-up oubliette until you find either Brother Samuel or Brother Samuel's body. Do you understand me?'

He kicked the copper bowl into the fire. A cloud of steam erupted from its raging heart, filling the air with an unpleasant metallic tang. The monk continued to stare at the floor, desperate to be dismissed, but the Abbot's mind was elsewhere.

As the hissing subsided and the fire settled, so it seemed did the Abbot's mood.

'He must have jumped,' he said at length. 'So his body *has* to be lying somewhere in the grounds. Maybe it got caught in a tree. Perhaps a strong wind carried it away from the mountain and it now lies somewhere we have not yet thought to look; but we need to find it before dawn brings the first coachload of gawping interlopers.'

'As you wish.'

The monk bowed and made ready to leave, but a knock on the door startled him afresh. He looked up in time to see another monk sweep boldly into the room without waiting for the Abbot to bid him enter. The new arrival was small and slight, his sharp features and sunken eyes giving him a look of haunted intelligence, like he understood more than he was comfortable with; yet he exuded quiet authority, even though he wore the brown cassock of the Administrata, the lowliest of the guilds within the Citadel. It was the Abbot's chamberlain, Athanasius, a man instantly recognizable throughout the mountain because, uniquely among the ritually long-haired and bearded men, he was totally bald due to the alopecia he had suffered since the age of seven. Athanasius glanced at the Abbot's companion, saw the colour of his cassock and quickly averted his eyes. By the strict rules of the Citadel the green cloaks – the Sancti – were segregated. As the Abbot's chamberlain, Athanasius very occasionally crossed paths with one, but any form of communication was expressly forbidden.

'Forgive my intrusion, Brother Abbot,' Athanasius said, running his hand slowly across his smooth scalp, as he did in times of stress. 'But I beg to inform you that Brother Samuel has been found.'

The Abbot smiled and opened his arms expansively, as if preparing to warmly embrace the news.

'There you are,' he said. 'All is well again. The secret is safe and our order is secure. Tell me, where did they find the body?'

The hand continued its slow journey across the pale skull. 'There is no body,' he paused. 'Brother Samuel did not jump from the mountain. He *climbed* out. He is about four hundred feet up, on the eastern face.'

The Abbot's arms dropped to his sides, his expression darkening once more.

In his mind he pictured the granite wall springing vertically from the glacial plain of the valley, making up one side of the holy fortress.

'No matter.' He gave a dismissive wave. 'It is impossible to scale the eastern face, and there are still several hours till daybreak. He will tire well before then and fall to his death. And even if by some miracle he does manage to make it to the lower slopes, our brethren on the outside will apprehend him. He will be exhausted by such a climb. He will not offer them much resistance.'

'Of course, Brother Abbot,' Athanasius said. 'Except . . .' He continued to smooth down hair that had long since departed.

'Except what?' the Abbot snapped.

'Except Brother Samuel is not climbing *down* the mountain.' Athanasius's palm finally separated itself from the top of his head. 'He's climbing *up* it.'

3

The black wind blew through the night, sliding across the high peaks and the glacier to the east of the city, sucking up its prehistoric chill with fragments of grit and moraine freed by the steady thaw.

It picked up speed as it dipped down into the sunken plain of Ruin, cupped like a huge bowl within an unbroken ring of jagged peaks. It whispered through the ancient vineyards, olive groves and pistachio orchards that clung to the lower slopes, and on towards the neon and sodium glow of the urban sprawl where it had once flapped the canvas and tugged at the red-and-gold sun flag of Alexander the Great and the *Vexillum* of the fourth Roman legion and all the standards of every frustrated army that had clustered in shivering siege round the tall dark mountain while their leaders stared up, coveting the secret it contained.

The wind swept on now, keening down the wide straight highway of the eastern boulevard, past the mosque built by Suleiman the Magnificent and across the stone balcony of the Hotel Napoleon where the great general had stood, listening to his army ransacking the city below while he stared up, surveying the carved stone battlements of the dark dagger mountain that would remain unconquered, piercing the flank of his incomplete empire and haunting his dreams as he later lay dying in exile.

The wind moaned onwards, cascading over the high walls of the old town, squeezing through streets built narrow to hamper

the charge of armoured men, slipping past ancient houses filled to the beams with modern mementoes, and rattling tourist signs that now swung where the mouldering bodies of slaughtered enemies had once dangled.

Finally it leapt the embankment wall, soughed through grass where a black moat once flowed and slammed into the mountain where even it could gain no access until, swirling skywards, it found a lone figure in the dark green habit of an order not seen since the thirteenth century, moving slowly and inexorably up the frozen rock face.

4

Samuel had not climbed anything as challenging as the Citadel for a long, long time. Thousands of years of hail and sleet-filled wind had smoothed the surface of the mountain to an almost glassy finish, giving him virtually no hold as he worked his way painstakingly to its summit.

Then there was the cold.

The icy wind that had smoothed the rock over aeons had also chilled its heart. His skin froze to it on contact, giving him a few moments' valuable traction, until he had to tear it free again, leaving his hands and knees bloody and raw. The wind gusted about him, tugging at his cassock with invisible fingers, trying to pluck him away and down to a dark death.

The rope belt wrapped around his right arm rubbed the skin from his wrist as he repeatedly threw it high and wide toward tiny outcrops that were otherwise beyond his reach. He pulled hard each time, closing the noose around whatever scant anchor he had snagged, willing it not to slip or break as he inched further up the unconquerable monolith.

The cell he had escaped from had been close to the chamber where the Sacrament was held, in the uppermost section of the Citadel. The higher he managed to get, the less he risked coming within reach of other cells where his captors might be waiting.

The rock which had up to this point been hard and glassy became suddenly jagged and brittle. He had crossed an ancient

geological stratum to a softer layer that had been weakened and split by the cold that had tempered the granite below. There were deep fissures in its surface, making it easier to climb but infinitely more treacherous. Foot- and handholds crumbled without warning; fragments of stone tumbled down into the frozen darkness. In fear and desperation he jammed his hands and feet deep into the jagged crevices; they held his weight but were lacerated in the process.

As he moved higher and the wind strengthened, the cliff face began to arch back on itself. Gravity, which had previously aided his grip, now wrested him away from the mountain. Twice, when a sliver of rock broke away in his hand, the only thing that stopped him from plummeting a thousand feet was the rope bound to his wrist and the powerful conviction that the journey of his life was not yet over.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime of climbing, he reached up for his next handhold and felt only air. His hand fell forward on to a plateau across which the wind flowed freely into the night.

He gripped the edge and dragged himself up. He pushed against crumbling footholds with numb and shredded feet and heaved his body on to a stone platform as cold as death, felt the limits of the space with his outstretched hands and crawled to its centre, keeping low to avoid the worst of the buffeting wind. It was no bigger than the room he had so recently escaped, but whilst there he had been a helpless captive; up here he felt like he always had when he'd conquered an insurmountable peak – elated, ecstatic, and unutterably free.

5

The spring sun rose early and clear, casting long shadows down the valley. At this time of year it rose above the red Taurus peaks and shone directly down the great boulevard to the heart of the city where the road circling the Citadel picked out three other ancient thoroughfares, each marking a precise point of the compass.

With the dawn came the mournful sound of the muezzin from the mosque in the east of the city, calling those of a different faith to prayer as it had done since the Christian city had fallen to Arab armies in the seventh century. It also brought the first coach party of tourists, gathering by the portcullis, bleary-eyed and dyspeptic from their early starts and hurried breakfasts.

As they stood, yawning and waiting for their day of culture to begin, the muezzin's cry ended, leaving behind a different, eerie sound that seemed to drift down the ancient streets beyond the heavy wooden gate. It was a sound that crept into each of them, picking at their private fears, forcing eyes wider and hands to pull coats and fleeces tighter round soft, vulnerable bodies that suddenly felt the penetrating chill of the morning. It sounded like a hive of insects waking in the hollow depths of the earth, or a great ship groaning as it broke and sank into the silence of a bottomless sea. A few exchanged nervous glances, shivering involuntarily as it swirled around them, until it finally took shape as the vibrating hum of hundreds of deep male voices intoning sacred words in a language few could make out and none could understand.

The huge portcullis suddenly shifted in its stone housing, making most of them jump, as electric motors began to lift it on reinforced steel cables hidden away in the stonework to preserve the appearance of antiquity. The drone of electric motors drowned out the incantations of the monks until, by the time the portcullis completed its upward journey and slammed into place, it had vanished, leaving the army of tourists to slowly invade the steep streets leading to the oldest fortress on earth in spooked silence.

They made their way through the complex maze of cobbled streets, trudging steadily upwards past the bath houses and spas, where the miraculous health-giving waters of Ruin had been enjoyed long before the Romans annexed the idea; past the armouries and smithies – now restaurants and gift shops selling souvenir grails, vials of spa water and holy crosses – until they arrived at the main square, bordered on one side by the immense public church, the only holy building in the entire complex they were allowed to enter.

Some of the dopier onlookers had been known to stop here, gaze up at its façade and complain to the stewards that the Citadel didn't look anything like it did in the guidebooks. Redirected to an imposing stone gateway in the far corner of the square, they would turn a final bend and stop dead. Grey, monumental, immense, a tower of rock rose majestically before them, sculpted in places into ramparts and rough battlements, with the occasional stained-glass window – the only hint at the mountain's sacred purpose – set into its face like jewels.

6

The same sun that shone down on this slowly advancing army of tourists now warmed Samuel, lying motionless more than a thousand feet above them.

The feeling crept back into his limbs as the heat returned, bringing with it a deep and crucifying pain. He reached out and pushed himself into a sitting position, staying that way for a moment, his eyes still closed, his ruined hands flat against the summit, soothed by the primordial chill from the ancient stone. Finally he opened them and gazed upon the city of Ruin stretched out far below him.

He began to pray, as he always did when he'd made it safely to a peak.

Dear God our Father . . .

But as his mouth began to form the words, an image surfaced in his mind. He faltered. After the hell he'd witnessed the previous night, the obscenity that had been perpetrated in His name, he realized he was no longer sure who or what he was praying to. He felt the cold rock beneath his fingers, the rock from which, somewhere below him, the room that held the Sacrament had been carved. He pictured it now, and what it contained, and felt wonder, and terror, and shame.

Tears welled up in his eyes and he searched his mind for something, anything, to replace the image that haunted him. The warm, rising air carried with it the smell of sun-toasted grass,

stirring a memory; a picture began to form, of a girl, vague and indistinct at first, but sharpening as it took hold. A face both strange and familiar, a face full of love, pulled into focus from the blur of his past.

His hand shifted instinctively to his side, to the site of his oldest scar, one not freshly made and bloody, but long-since healed. As he pressed against it he felt something else, buried in the corner of his pocket. He pulled it out and gazed down upon a small, waxy apple, the remains of the simple meal he had not been able to eat earlier in the refectory. He had been too nervous, knowing that in a few short hours he would be inducted into the most ancient and sacred brotherhood on earth. Now here he was, on top of the world in his own personal hell.

He devoured the apple, feeling the sweetness flood into his aching body, warming him from within as it fuelled his exhausted muscles. He chewed the core to nothing and spat the pips into his lacerated palm. A splinter of rock was embedded in the fleshy pad. He raised it to his mouth and yanked it away, feeling the sharp pain of its extraction.

He spat it into his hand, wet with his own blood, a tiny replica of the slender peak he now perched upon. He wiped it clean with his thumb and stared at the grey rock beneath. It was the same colour and texture as the heretical book he had been shown in the depths of the great library during his preparation. Its pages had been made from similar stone, their surfaces crammed with symbols carved by a hand long since rendered to dust. The words he had read there, a prophecy in shape and form, seemed to warn of the end of things if the Sacrament became known beyond the walls of the Citadel.

He looked out across the city, the morning sun catching his green eyes and the high, sharp cheekbones beneath them. He thought of all the people down there, living their lives, striving in thought and deed to do good, to get on, to move closer to God. After the tragedies of his own life he had come here, to

the wellspring of faith, to devote himself to the same ends. Now here he knelt, as high as it was possible to get on the holiest of mountains –

– and he had never felt further from Him.

Images drifted across his darkened mind: images of what he had lost, of what he had learned. And as the prophetic words, carved in the secret stone of the heretical book, crawled through his memory, he saw something new in them. And what he had first read as a warning now shone like a revelation.

He had already carried knowledge of the Sacrament this far outside the Citadel; who was to say he could not carry it further? Maybe he could become the instrument to shine light into this dark mountain and bring an end to what he had witnessed. And even if he was wrong, and this crisis of faith was the weakness of one not fit to divine the purpose of what he had seen, then surely God *would* intervene. The secret would remain so, and who would mourn the life of one confused monk?

He glanced up at the sky. The sun was rising higher now – the bringer of light, the bringer of life. It warmed him as he looked back down at the stone in his hand, his mind as sharp now as its jagged edge.

And he knew what he must do.