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THE KEY

SIMON TOYNE

HARPER

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1

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I

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind . . . And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues . . .

King James Bible *Acts 2:2–4*

1

Al-Hillah, Babil Province, Central Iraq

The desert warrior stared through the sand-scoured window, goggles hiding his eyes, his keffiyeh masking the rest of his face. Everything out there was bleached the colour of bone: the buildings, the rubble – even the people.

He watched a man shuffle along the far side of the street, his own keffiyeh swathed against the dust. There weren't many passers-by in this part of town, not with the noon sun high in the white sky and the temperature way into the fifties. Even so, they needed to be quick.

From somewhere behind him in the depths of the building came a dull thud and a muffled groan. He watched for any indication the stranger may have heard, but he kept walking, sticking close to the sliver of shade provided by a wall pock-marked by automatic weapon fire and grenade blasts. He watched until the man had melted away in the heat-haze, then turned his attention back to the room.

The office was part of a garage on the outskirts of the city. It smelled of oil and sweat and cheap cigarettes. A framed photograph hung on one wall, its subject appearing to proudly survey the piles of greasy paperwork and engine parts that covered every surface. The room was just about big enough for a desk and a couple of chairs and small enough for the bulky air-conditioning unit to maintain a reasonable temperature. When it was working. Right now it wasn't. The place was like an oven.

The city had been plagued for months by power cuts, one of the many prices they'd had to pay for liberation. People were already talking about Saddam's regime like it was the good old days. *Sure, people might have disappeared from time to time, but at least the lights stayed on*. It amazed him how quickly they forgot. He forgot nothing. He'd been an outlaw in Saddam's time and had remained one under the current occupation. His allegiance was to the land.

Another grunt of pain snapped him back to the present. He began emptying drawers, opening cupboards, hoping he might quickly find the stone he was looking for and vanish into the desert before the next patrol swung past. But the man who had it clearly knew its value. There was no trace of it here.

He took the photograph off the wall. A thick black Saddam moustache spread across a face made featureless by pudgy prosperity; a white dishdasha strained against the man's belly as his arms stretched around two shyly grinning young girls who had unfortunately inherited their father's looks. The three of them were leaning against the white 4x4 now parked on the garage forecourt. He studied it now, heard the tick of the cooling engine, saw the shimmer of hot air above it, and a small but distinctive circle low down in the centre of the blackened glass of the windscreen. He smiled and walked towards it, the photo still in his hand.

The workroom took up most of the rear of the building. It was darker than the office and just as hot. Neon strips hung uselessly from the ceiling and a fan sat in the corner, silent and still. A vivid slash of sunlight from a couple of narrow windows high in the back wall fell across an engine block dangling on chains that seemed far too slender to hold it. Below it, lashed to the workbench with razor wire, the fat man in the photograph was struggling to breathe. He was stripped to the waist, his huge, hairy stomach rising and falling in time

with every laboured breath. His nose was bloodied and broken and one of his eyes had swollen shut. Crimson rivulets ran from where the wire touched his sweat-slicked skin.

A man in dusty fatigues stood over him, his face also obscured by keffiyeh and goggles.

'Where is it?' he said, slowly raising a tyre iron that was wet with blood.

The fat man said nothing, merely shook his head, his breathing growing more rapid in the anticipation of fresh pain. Snot and blood bubbled from his nostrils into his moustache. He screwed up his one good eye. The tyre iron rose higher.

Then the desert warrior stepped into the room.

The fat man's face remained clenched in expectation of another blow. When none came he opened his good eye and discovered the second figure standing over him.

'Your daughters?' The newcomer held up the photograph. 'Pretty. Maybe they can tell us where their *babba* hides things?'

The voice was sandpaper on stone.

The fat man recognized it, and fear glazed his staring eye as the desert warrior slowly unwound his keffiyeh, slipped off the sand goggles, and leaned into the shaft of sunlight, causing his pupils to shrink to black dots in the centre of eyes so pale they appeared almost grey. The fat man registered their distinctive colour and shifted his gaze to the ragged scar encircling the man's throat.

'You know who I am?'

He nodded.

'Say it.'

'You are Ash'abah. You are . . . the Ghost.'

'Then you know why I am here?'

Another nod.

'So tell me where it is. Or would you prefer me to drop this engine on your skull and drag your daughters over for a new family photo?'

Defiance surged up inside him at the mention of his family.

'If you kill me you will find nothing,' he said. 'Not the thing you seek, and not my daughters. I would rather die than put them in danger's way.'

The Ghost laid the photograph down on the bench and reached into his pocket for the portable sat-nav he had pulled from the windscreen of the 4x4. He pressed a button and held it out for the man to see. The screen displayed a list of recent destinations. The third one down was the Arabic word for 'Home'. The Ghost tapped a fingernail lightly on it and the display changed to show a street map of a residential area on the far side of town.

All the fight drained from the fat man's face in an instant. He took a breath and, in as steady a voice as he could manage, told the Ghost what he needed to hear.

The 4x4 bounced over broken ground alongside one of the numerous canals that criss-crossed the landscape to the east of Al-Hillah. The terrain was a striking mixture of barren desert and patches of dense, tropical greenery. It was known as the Fertile Crescent, part of ancient Mesopotamia – the land between two rivers. Ahead of them a line of lush grass and date palms sketched out the banks of one of them – the Tigris – and the Euphrates lay behind them. Between these ancient boundaries mankind had invented the written word, algebra and the wheel, and many believed it was the original location of the Garden of Eden, but no one had ever found it. Abraham – father of the three great religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity – had been born here. The Ghost had come into existence here too, birthed by the land he now served as a loyal son.

The truck eased past a palm grove and bounced out into the chalk-white desert, baked to concrete by the relentless sun. The fat man grunted as pain jarred through his bruised flesh. The Ghost ignored him, fixing his gaze on a hazy pile of rubble starting to take shape through the windscreen. It was

too soon to say what it was, or even how close. The extreme heat of the desert played tricks with distance and time. Looking out at the bleached horizon he could have been staring at a scene from the Bible: the same broken land and parchment sky, the same smudge of moon melting upon it.

The mirage began to take more solid form as they drew closer. It was much bigger than he'd first thought: a square structure, 'man-made', two storeys high, probably an abandoned caravanserai serving the camel trains that used to travel through these ancient lands. Its flat clay bricks, baked hard by the same sun almost a thousand years ago, were now crumbling back to their original dust.

Dust thou art, the Ghost thought as he surveyed the scene, *And unto dust shalt thou return*.

Blast marks became apparent as they drew closer, peppering the outer walls. The damage was recent – evidence of insurgence, or possibly target practice by British or American troops. The Ghost felt his jaw clench in anger and wondered how the invaders would like it if armed Iraqis started blowing lumps out of Stonehenge or Mount Rushmore.

'There. Stop there.' The fat man pointed to a small cairn of rocks a few hundred metres short of the main ruin.

The driver steered towards it and crunched to a halt. The Ghost scanned the horizon, saw the shimmer of air rising from hot earth, the gentle movement of palm fronds and in the distance a cloud of dust, possibly a military column on the move, but too far away to be of immediate concern. He opened the car door to the furnace heat and turned to the hostage.

'Show me,' he whispered.

The fat man stumbled across the baked terrain, the Ghost and the driver following his exact footsteps to avoid any mines he may try to lure them on to. Three metres short of the pile of rocks the man stopped and pointed to the ground. The Ghost followed the line of his extended arm and saw a faint depression in the earth. 'Booby traps?'

The fat man stared at him as though he'd insulted his family. 'Of course,' he said, holding out his hand for the keys to the truck. He took them and pointed the fob towards the ground. The muted chirp of a lock deactivating sounded somewhere beneath them, then he dropped down, brushing away layers of dust to reveal a hatch secured on one side by a padlock wrapped in a plastic bag. He selected a small key then wrenched open the square trapdoor.

Sunlight streamed down into the bunker. The fat man lowered himself on to a ladder that dropped steeply away into the darkness. The Ghost watched him all the way down from over the barrel of his pistol until he looked up, his one good eye squinting against the brightness. 'I'm going to get a torch,' he said, reaching out into the dark.

The Ghost said nothing, just tightened his finger on the trigger in case something else appeared in his hand. A cone of light clicked on in the darkness and shone into the swollen face of the garage owner.

The driver went next while the Ghost did a final sweep of the horizon. The dust cloud was further away now, still heading north towards Baghdad. There were no other signs of life. Satisfied that they were alone, he slid down into the dark earth.

The cave had been cut from rock by ancient hands and stretched away several metres in each direction. Military-style shelving units had been set up along each wall with thick sheets of polythene draped over them to protect their contents from the dust. The Ghost reached over and pulled one aside. The shelf was filled with guns, neatly stacked AK-47 assault rifles mostly, all bearing the scars of combat usage. Underneath them were rows of spam cans with stencilled lettering in Chinese, Russian, and Arabic, each containing 7.62mm rounds.

The Ghost worked his way down the shelves, pulling aside each polythene sheet in turn to discover more weapons, heavy artillery shells, brick-like stacks of dollar bills, bags of dried

leaves and white powder, and finally – near the back of the cave on a shelf of its own – he found what he was looking for.

He eased the loose bundle of sacking towards him, feeling the drag of the heavy object inside, then unwrapped it reverently, with the same care he would use to peel dressings from burned flesh. Inside was a flat slate tablet. He tilted it towards the light, revealing faint markings on its surface. He traced their outline with his finger – a letter 'T' turned upside down.

The driver glanced over, his gun still on the hostage, his eyes drawn to the sacred object. 'What does it say?'

The Ghost flipped the sacking back over the stone. 'It is written in the lost language of the gods,' he said, picking up the bundle and cradling it as if it were a newborn. 'Not for us to read, only for us to keep safe.' He walked up to the fat man and glared into his battered face, his pale eyes unnaturally bright in the dim light. 'This belongs to the land. It should not be tossed on a shelf with these things. Where did you get it?'

'I swapped it with a goatherd, for a couple of guns and some ammunition.'

'Tell me his name and where I might find him.'

'He was a Bedouin. I don't know his name. I was doing some business up in Ramadi and he brought it to sell, along with some other bits of junk. He said he found it in the desert. Maybe he did, maybe he stole it. I gave him a good price anyway.' He looked up with his one good eye. 'And now you will steal it from me.'

The Ghost weighed this new information. Ramadi was a half-day's drive north. One of the main centres of resistance during the invasion and occupation, it had been bombed and shelled to rubble, and now had a cursed air hanging over it. It was also home to one of Saddam's palaces, now stripped clean by looters. The relic could easily have come from there. The late president had been a keen stealer and hoarder of his own country's treasures. 'How long ago did you buy it?'

'About ten days, during the monthly market.'

The Bedouin could be anywhere by now, roaming with his sheep across hundreds of square kilometres of desert. The Ghost held the bundle up for the fat man to see. 'If you come across anything else like this, you hold on to it and let me know. That way you become my friend – understand? You know I can be a useful friend, and you do not want me as your enemy.'

The man nodded.

The Ghost held his gaze for a moment then replaced the sand goggles.

'What about the rest of this stuff?' the driver said.

'Leave it. There's no need to take away this man's livelihood.' He turned to the ladder and started to climb towards the daylight.

'Wait!'

The fat man looked at him with confusion, puzzled by his surprising act of charity.

'The Bedouin herder, he wears a red football cap. I offered to buy it, as a joke, and he became offended. He said it was his most precious possession.'

'What team?'

'Manchester United – the red devils.'

2

Vatican City, Rome

Cardinal Secretary Clementi drew deeply on his cigarette, sucking the soothing smoke into his anxious body as he looked down on the tourists swarming across St Peter's Square like a plump god despairing of his creation. Several groups stood directly beneath him, their viewpoint alternating between their guidebooks and the window where he stood. He was pretty sure they couldn't see him, his well-stuffed black cardinal's surplice helping him to blend into the shadows. They were not looking for him anyway. He took another long draw on his cigarette and watched them realize their mistake then shift their collective gaze to the closed windows of the papal apartments to his left. Smoking inside the building was forbidden, but as Cardinal Secretary of the city-state, Clementi didn't consider the odd indulgence in his private office an outrageous abuse of position. He generally restricted himself to two a day, but today was different; today he was already on his fifth, and it wasn't even lunchtime.

He took one last long breath of nicotine-laced air, crushed the cigarette out in the marble ashtray resting on the sill, then turned to face the bad news that was spread across his desk like a slick. As was his preference, the morning papers had been arranged in the same configuration as the countries on a world map – the American broadsheets on the left, the Russian and Australian on the right, and the European ones

in the middle. Usually the headlines were all different, each reflecting a national obsession with a local celebrity or political scandal.

Today they were all the same, as they had been for over a week now, each carrying more or less the same picture: the dark, dagger-like mountain fortress known as the Citadel that sat at the very heart of the ancient Turkish city of Ruin.

Ruin was a curiosity in the modern church, a former ancient powerhouse that had become, along with Lourdes and Santiago de Compostela, one of the Catholic Church's most popular and enduring shrines. Carved out of a vertical mountain by human hands, the Citadel of Ruin was the oldest continually inhabited structure on earth and original centre of the Catholic Church. The first Bible had been written within its mysterious walls, and it was widely believed that the greatest secrets of the early Church were still kept there. Much of the mystery surrounding the place stemmed from its strict tradition of silence. No one but the monks and priests who lived in the Citadel were ever allowed to set foot inside the sacred mountain and, once they had entered, they were never again permitted to set foot outside. Maintenance of the half-carved mountain, with its high battlements and narrow windows, fell exclusively to the inhabitants; and over time the Citadel had developed the half-finished, ramshackle appearance that had given the city its name. But despite its appearance, it was no Ruin. It remained the only fortress in all of history that had never been breached, the only one that had held on to its ancient treasures and secrets.

Then, a little over a week ago, a monk had climbed to the top of the mountain. With TV cameras capturing his every move, he had arranged his limbs to form the sign of the Tau – symbol of the Sacrament, the Citadel's greatest secret – and thrown himself from the summit.

The reaction to the monk's violent death had sparked a global wave of anti-Church feeling that had culminated in a

direct attack on the Citadel. A series of explosions had ripped through the Turkish night to reveal a tunnel leading into the base of the fortress. And for the first time in history, people had come out of the mountain – ten monks and three civilians, all suffering from varying degrees of injury – and the newspapers had been full of little else since.

Clementi picked up the morning edition of *La Republicca*, one of the more popular Italian newspapers, and read the banner headline:

CITADEL SURVIVORS LATEST
DID THEY DISCOVER THE SECRET OF
THE SACRAMENT?

It was the same question all the papers had been asking, using the explosion as a pretext to dredge up every old legend about the Citadel and its most infamous secret. The whole reason the power base had moved to Rome in the fourth century was to distance the Church from its secretive past. Ever since, Ruin had looked after its own affairs and kept its house in order – until now.

Clementi picked up another paper, a British tabloid showing a shining chalice floating above the Citadel with the headline:

CHURCH ON ROAD TO RUIN
'HOLY GRAIL' OF SECRETS ABOUT
TO BE REVEALED?

Other papers concerned themselves with the more lurid and morbid side of the story. Of the thirteen people who had emerged from the mountain, only five survived, the rest having died from their injuries. There were plenty of pictures: harshly lit shots snatched from over the heads of the paramedics as they stretchered the monks to the waiting ambulances, the flash photography highlighting the green of their cassocks and

the red of the blood that ran from the ritualized wounds that criss-crossed their bodies.

The whole thing was a huge PR disaster, making the Church look like a demented, secretive, mediaeval cult: bad enough at the best of times, calamitous right now when Clementi had so many other things on his mind and needed the mountain to hold its secrets tighter than ever.

He sat down heavily at his desk, feeling the weight of the responsibilities he alone carried. As Cardinal Secretary of State, he was de facto prime minister of the Vatican city-state and had far-reaching executive powers over the Church's interests, both domestic and international. Ordinarily, the executive council in the Citadel would have dealt with the situation in Ruin. Like the Vatican, it was an autonomous state within a state with its own powers and influence, but since the explosion he had heard nothing from the mountain – nothing at all – and it was this silence, rather than the clamour of the world's press, that he found most disturbing. It meant the current crisis in Ruin was very much his concern.

Reaching over the sea of newsprint, Clementi tapped his keyboard. Already his inbox was bursting with the day's business, but he ignored it all, clicking instead on a private folder labelled RUIN. A prompt box asked for his password and he carefully typed it in, knowing if he got it wrong the whole computer would lock and it would take at least a day for a technician to unlock it again. An hourglass icon appeared as his server processed the complex encryption software, then another mailbox opened. It was empty – still no word. Leaving the subject line blank, he typed into the body of a new message:

Anything?

He hit *send* and watched it disappear from his screen, then shuffled the newspapers into a neat pile and sorted through some letters that required his signature while he waited for a reply.

The moment the explosion had torn through the Citadel, Clementi had mobilized agents of the Church to closely monitor the situation. He had used Citadel assets to maintain distance from Rome, hoping that the executive council inside the mountain would recover quickly and take over responsibility for the clean-up. In his orderly politician's mind he saw it as deploying weapons to deal with an oncoming threat. He had never imagined he might be called upon to personally fire them.

Outside he could hear the chatter of the tourists drifting up from the square as they marvelled at the majesty and wonder of the Church, little knowing what turmoil boiled inside it. A sound like a knife striking a wineglass announced the arrival of a message.

> Still nothing. There is a rumour that a ninth monk is about to die. What do you want me to do with the others?

His hand hovered over the keyboard ready to type a reply. Perhaps the situation was resolving itself. If another monk died there would be just four survivors remaining – but three of these were civilians, not bound by silence and obedience to the mother church. They posed the greatest threat of all.

His eyes crept across to the stack of newspapers on the corner of his desk and saw their photographs staring back at him – two women and one man. Ordinarily the Citadel would have dealt with them swiftly and decisively because of the threat they posed to the long-held secret of the mountain. Clementi, however, was a Roman cleric, more politician than priest, a creature far removed from the trials of direct action. Unlike the Prelate of Ruin, he was not used to signing death warrants.

He rose from his desk and drifted back towards the window, distancing himself from his decision.

There had been signs of life inside the mountain over the past week – candles passing behind some of the high windows, smoke leaking from the chimney vents. They would have to break their silence sooner or later, re-engage with the world and tidy up their own mess. Until then he would be patient and keep his hands clean and his mind focused on the future of the Church and the real dangers that faced it, dangers that had nothing to do with Ruin or the secrets of the past.

He reached for the pack of cigarettes on the window sill, preparing to seal his decision with the sixth of the day, when the sound of shoe-leather on marble rose in the corridor outside. Someone was heading his way, in far too much of a hurry for it to be routine. There was a sharp tap on his door and the pinched features of Bishop Schneider appeared.

'What?' Clementi's question betrayed more irritation than he intended. Schneider was his personal secretary and one of the lean, career bishops who, like a lizard on the rim of a volcano, managed to live dangerously close to the white heat of power without ever seeming to get singed. His efficiency was beyond reproach, yet Clementi found it very hard to warm to him. But today Schneider's smooth veneer was absent.

'They're here,' he said.

'Who?'

But there was no need for an answer. Schneider's expression told him all he needed to know.

Clementi grabbed the cigarettes and thrust them into his pocket. He knew he would probably smoke them all in the next few hours.