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Written by Tom Knox

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THE DECEIT



TOM KNOX

HARPER

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Author's Note

The Deceit is a work of fiction. However, I have drawn on many real, historical, archaeological and cultural sources for this book. In particular:

The *Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage* is a book of spells and curses, compiled by a Jewish Kabbalist, Abraham of Worms, in fifteenth-century Germany. Various versions of the text survive in libraries across Europe. In occult circles the magic of Abra-Melin is regarded as the most 'dangerous' of all hermetic rituals.

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) was a British mountaineer, adventurer, drug-addict and black magician, and for a time a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, alongside artists such as the Irish poet, and Nobel laureate, W B Yeats. In 1924 a disciple of Crowley's died in Crowley's house in Cefalu, Sicily – allegedly after Crowley had fed him the blood of a cat.

The little town of Akhmim is possibly the oldest

inhabited site in Egypt. Regarded as the cradle of alchemy, and as one of the birthplaces of Gnostic and Coptic Christianity, Akhmim also, in antiquity, enjoyed a reputation as being home to the greatest magicians in Egypt. Despite its extraordinary history, Akhmim has never been properly excavated by archaeologists.

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– Muslim and Christian, Arabs and Nubians – who have shown me so many corners of that fascinating country, and for being so hospitable every time I came visiting – even when Egypt was in violent political turmoil.

I am grateful to Al-Tayyeb Hassan, who drove me to the remotest parts of Middle Egypt. I am also grateful to Ethar Shalaby, who showed me around the home of the Zabaleen in Moqqatam, Cairo. Finally, I am enormously indebted to the Zabaleen themselves for allowing me a glimpse of their lives.

This book is dedicated to the nuns of the fourth-century Coptic monastery of St Tawdros, near the Valley of the Queens, Luxor.

‘And the LORD brought us FORTH out of EGYPT, with a mighty hand.’

Deuteronomy 26:8

1

Cairo, Egypt

The taxi stopped in the City of the Dead. Victor Sassoon stared out of the dusty cab window, adjusting his spectacles, and cursing his seventy-five-year-old eyesight.

Ranked on either side of the unpaved road, that led directly through the cemetery, was a monumental parade of Mameluke shrines, yellow-painted mausoleums, and enormous white Fatimid graves; in front of the larger tombs, young children played obscure games in the ancient dirt.

Sassoon stared, a little deeper: he could glimpse shrouded Arab women in the unknowable interiors; he could also see the blue and orange of charcoal braziers: the women were cooking chicken claws and flatbreads amidst the corpse-dust.

The cab engine idled. The women gazed, from behind their veils. Sassoon wondered if the denizens of the City of the Dead could tell he was Jewish. *Anglo*-Jewish.

He leaned and tapped the cab driver on the shoulder.

'Why have we stopped?'

Silence.

'Why?' he repeated.

The driver shrugged, not turning; the violet prayer-beads hanging from his rear-view mirror shivered in the breeze of the Cairene winter.

A kid in a grimy *djellaba* – the long Arabic robe worn across North Africa and beyond – wandered over to the taxi. The boy was smiling at Victor, as if he knew something Victor didn't.

'Why? Tell me.' Victor raised his voice, a hint of panic therein. He didn't want to be stuck here in the cemetery with the *fellahin*. The City of the Dead, one of Cairo's direst slums, was a dangerous place to linger.

'*Aiiii*.' The cab driver squinted at Victor via the mirror. '*Afwan, khlass, ntar*—'

'Stop!' Victor snapped. 'I know you speak English!'

Not for the first time, Victor condemned himself for his inability to speak much modern Arabic – despite speaking dead languages by the dozen.

The cab driver sighed.

'You are from England, yes? *Inglizi?*'

Victor nodded once more.

'So I see you do not understand.' The driver smiled, patiently. 'I will explain. You want to go to Manshiyat Naser?'

'Yes, you know that. Moqqatam.'

'*Aiwa*. Moqqatam.'

The wind was picking up as the winter sun weakened:

it made Victor cough, and reach for his handkerchief. The breeze was carrying a hateful dust: the residue of the dead.

Victor wiped his mouth and spoke.

'We agreed you'd take me there.'

The driver shook his head.

'Look and see. Thief and drug-seller live here. In the tomb.'

'So let us go. Please. Quickly.'

'*Ahlan sadiqi*, you are not understanding. Even the people *here*, even the people in City of the Dead will not go to Moqqatam.'

'I don't care. You said—'

'No.'

'But—'

'You walk now. Is just a walk? One or two kilometre. That way.'

The driver was pointing at a raised freeway thick with frenzied Cairo traffic, and beyond that a mighty cliff, grey and gloomy in the impending twilight.

Under that cliff, as Victor knew, was the abandoned quarry which was home to Cairo's poorest of the poor: the Zabaleen.

The Zabaleen suburb, Garbage City, had a terrible reputation – worse, perhaps, than that of the City of the Dead. But Victor did not care. At the back of Moqqatam was, apparently, an ancient church, the Monastery of the Cave. And in that monastery was an old priest who could tell him whether the Sokar Hoard really existed. And whether it could be deciphered.

And right now the archaic documents that comprised the Sokar Hoard meant more to Victor than his own dwindling life. The faint but persistent rumours in London, in Egyptological circles, were too startling to ignore.

The Copts have discovered a cache of documents in Middle Egypt. Parts are written in Arabic and French, as well as the most ancient Coptic. The Arabic and French commentaries imply that the Coptic source texts are revolutionary: they could alter our entire understanding of religion.

Of course these rumours were probably exaggerated. But even if you stripped out the hyperbole, the prospect was extremely enticing. Not least because the supposed provenance of the Sokar Hoard – Coptic Middle Egypt – made it all the more plausible that someone had indeed found *something*.

Coptic Middle Egypt was one of the historically richest yet least explored areas of the Middle East. Middle Egypt was where, in 1945, two farmers had unearthed an old earthenware jar which turned out to contain the famous Gnostic Gospels: heretical Christian writings which had since radically altered the conception of Christianity's evolution.

And yet this new prize, the Sokar Hoard, was said to be *vastly more significant*?

Victor *had* to find it. It was his final calling, his allotted task, his Jewish destiny. He was probably one of a handful of scholars who could translate the source text, the Ur text in old Coptic.

But right now he was stuck in a rusty Cairo taxi, surrounded by dirty kids who lived in tombs.

The cab driver sighed, again.

Belatedly, it dawned on Victor what the driver wanted. *Baksheesh*. More money. *Of course.*

He reached in the pocket of his blazer, pulled out his wallet and handed over a fold of new notes.

'Two hundred Egyptian pounds. Now take me to Moqqatam!'

The driver stared at the money in Victor's hand as if it was something utterly repugnant. Then he took the cash and jammed it in the sweat-stained pocket of his nylon shirt. And started the car.

The drive took merely ten minutes, past the last of the Fatimid ossuaries, past the final tombs of the Abbasid nobles, past an Ottoman mausoleum adapted into a car-repair workshop. They made a quick dash and a violent U-turn on the angry motorway with its angry taxis, and then the smell hit.

A smell of apocalyptic grime and aching misery.

This was it: Moqqatam. Ahead of them was a road which led to a kind of mock gate made of mud-bricks, old tyres and crushed metal.

The taxi stopped again. Victor reached reflexively for his wallet. But this time the driver waved a dismissive hand, and his frown was sincere.

'*La*. You are here, mister. Manshiyat Naser.'

'But—'

'I am a Muslim. I cannot go in there . . . Not with . . .' He nodded in the direction of the gate. 'Not with the *Christians*.'

The last word was expressed with utter contempt, as if the driver was spitting on a rat.

There was no arguing for a second time. Victor Sassoon accepted his fate. He grabbed his walking stick and climbed stiffly out of the taxi, which reversed in a cumulus of dust, then accelerated back up the hill into real Cairo, where the Muslims lived.

Victor regarded the gate, and the suburb beyond.

Even the people in the City of the Dead will not come here.

Leaning on his walking stick, Victor said a quick Jewish prayer. This was his greatest scholarly adventure, the fitting culmination of a life spent untangling the truth of Jewish history and Jewish faith. This was the moment towards which his entire existence had been building. But he was ageing and ill, and time was short. Stick in hand, Victor Sassoon walked towards the City of Garbage.

2

The City of Garbage, Cairo

The first thing that he saw as he passed under the gate was quite unexpected: two beautiful, unveiled young Coptic women walking past in embroidered robes, laughing as they made their way through the mud and the stench. He glanced at them, warily, but they ignored him. Just another stooped old man.

Victor sighed stoically, and walked on. A plastic Christian icon, suspended above the road, swung in the chilly breeze.

The main street was lined on both sides by enormous sacks of rubbish. Faces gazed, perplexed and blank, from dark windows and doorways. These stares certainly weren't friendly. Yet neither were they necessarily hostile. They possessed a kind of desperate inertness.

Victor advanced. He knew from his research that the Monastery of the Cave was somewhere at the other

end of the suburb, right under Moqqatam Hill, carved out of the cliffs. He could be there in ten minutes. If he wasn't stopped.

To quell his anxiety, he went over what he knew.

The name Zabaleen meant, literally, 'the rubbish collectors'. But fifty years ago they were called the Zarraba, or the pig people, because that's what they had once been: peasant swineherds dwelling in the region of Assyut and Sohag, two hundred miles south of Cairo. In essence, they were just another tribe from Egypt's ancient Coptic communities – Christians who had been living in the Middle East since the second century AD, long before the Muslims arrived.

No one knew why the Zabaleen had suddenly decided to migrate to Cairo. Their lives in Middle Egypt had certainly been poor, and Assyut was a dusty and sometimes violent region: home to many Islamists, who had grown in power and audacity – and hostility to Christians – in the last fifty years. Yet, still, why did they move *here*? Victor Sassoon found it difficult to imagine that any peasant life in the sticks could be worse than that now endured by the Zabaleen in Cairo.

He'd reached the main street of the City of Garbage. Looming beyond the lofty and toppling houses of the township were the limestone cliffs that delimited Cairo's eastern suburbs. Directly behind him was the vastness of the City of the Dead and the urban motorways.

The whole neighbourhood was cut off and excluded.

It was also situated in a hollow – a great and disused quarry – which made it invisible to the rest of Cairo.

A young man stepped across the road towards Victor. He had a cheeky, Artful Dodger-ish grin.

'Hey. Hello? Mister? You tourist? Take photo of us? Fuck you.' The lad laughed, flicking his chin with his hand, and then sauntered away down a darkening alley.

Victor walked on. He was nearly there. He was trying not to look left or right but he couldn't help it. The scene was so extraordinarily medieval. No, *worse* than medieval.

Groups of women were sitting on stinking heaps of rubbish *inside* their own homes. The women spent their days herein, picking over the rubbish brought into Moqqatam by the men with their donkey carts. The women were looking for rags, paper, glass and metal: anything that could be recycled. Because this was what the Zabaleen did, this was their daily toil, and the sum of their existence: they sifted and recycled the garbage of Cairo, in the City of Garbage.

Pigs and goats scuttled between the tenements. Children played among bales of hospital waste; a toddler had been placed on sacks of refuse. Her smiling face was covered with flies.

Compassion pounded in Victor's heart. He wanted to help these people, shut away in their claustrophobic ghetto. Yet what could he do? He'd heard that some brave charity had opened a clinic here a few years ago, dispensing rudimentary medicine to deal with the

wounds and infections the Zabaleen contracted from their repellent environment.

Yet some also said the Zabaleen mistrusted modern medicine and refused help, preferring their traditional solace: religion. It was *God* that made the lives of these people bearable. If the Zabaleen were notorious for their bellicosity, for their sad or drunken desperation, they were also famous for their religious fidelity and devotion. The churches around here were thronged every Saturday, the Coptic Sabbath.

Even now Victor could see two women on a street corner kneeling to kiss the fat gold ring of a lavishly bearded Coptic priest. The black-cloaked priest smiled serenely at the purpling sky, while the women kneeled and kissed his jewellery, like supplicants in front of a Mafia godfather.

A priest? A priest meant a church. He needed to find the Monastery of the Cave.

Ahead, the main road, such as it was, forked left and right. On the left a man was butchering a pig in the gutter. The other lane led to a wall of distant rock. That was surely the route. And yes, through the dust and the bustle of Moqqatam, Victor could make out the arch of a monastic gate: probably the only noble piece of architecture for miles.

Victor Sassoon approached a wooden kiosk erected beside the gate. Inside, a badly shaven man sat scowling on a stool. The interior of the kiosk was decorated with lurid pictures of the Virgin Mary, with farcically huge eyes. Like a seal-pup.

'*Salaam*,' Victor said, as he leaned to the open window of the kiosk. 'Ah. *Salaam aleikum*, ah – ah—'

'I speak English.' The middle-aged man spat the words. 'What do you want?'

This was less than friendly.

'I am a visiting scholar from London. I am keen to meet Brother Wasef Qulta, in the monastery.'

A definite sneer lifted the gatekeeper's face.

'Many peoples want to see Brother Qulta. You need permission.'

'I have emailed and telephoned but I have been unable to get a response from the Coptic episcopate. Please. I only need a few minutes of his time. I have come a very long way.'

The gatekeeper shrugged. *No.*

Victor had expected this; and he had a plan.

'Perhaps I can explain better. I am . . . happy to make a very considerable donation to the monastery. I will entrust it with you?'

This was the entirety of Victor's plan: bribe his way in, bribe his way through every problem. It was crude but it was effective in a poor country like Egypt – especially in one of the poorest parts of Cairo. And Victor had plenty of money to spare.

Yet the gatekeeper was unmoved. He gazed at the dollar bills that Victor was discreetly flourishing and this time the sneer was angry. '*La!* No! *Ila jahaim malik!*'

But his anger was interrupted: by shouting. Victor turned. A slender, white-robed adolescent, perhaps a

novice monk, was yelling from the steps of the monastery, yelling at no one – and everyone. The shouting was loud and wild. Victor could not translate the words, but the meaning was clear – something terrible had happened. Some kind of crime?

The gatekeeper was already out of the tatty little kiosk, running towards the porch of the monastery; others pursued. Victor took his chance and joined the anxious people. He strained to see over the shoulders and arms. What was going on?

The crowds were too thick. Shameless now, Victor used his stick to lever himself between the onlookers. There! The monastery door was open – and Victor brazenly stepped inside.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the darkness within. There was a knot of people in the shadowy hallway: they were pointing at the stone stairs beyond. Victor caught the word 'police' – *shurta* – and then the word *qalita.*

Murder?

A noise came from the stairs, where a makeshift stretcher was being hauled along by sweating hands. The agitated Zabaleen stretcher-bearers lowered their burden, as they pressed towards the door. And then Victor gazed, quite appalled.

The man on the stretcher was pale and stiff. His robes had been wrenched open, revealing his white chest, where he had been stabbed brutally in the heart. The pools of blood were lurid. The crossguard of the dagger, still lodged between the ribs, gave the

impression the monk had been stabbed with a crucifix.

Victor recognized the silent face of the victim. It was Brother Wasef Qulta. Maybe the only man who knew the truth about the Sokar Hoard. And now he was dead.

3

Zennor, Cornwall

The year was gone; the party was over. Malcolm Harding wandered, unsteadily, through the detritus of their New Year's Eve merrymaking. He marvelled at how much booze ten people could manage to drink in seven hours.

The vodka bottles clinked at his feet; an entire army of empty beer cans stood to attention in the corner of the sitting room. Jojo was fast asleep on the sofa, cradling a wine bottle in her delicate hands.

He resisted the urge to look up her miniskirt.

She was so beautiful though. Even now, with her make-up mussed, sprawled dissolutely on the leather sofa, she was just lyrically pretty: perfect and blonde and twenty-one years old. Oh yes, he adored Jojo. Ever since they had arrived here on Christmas Eve in this grand and spooky old house, perched between enormous rocks in the wild west of Celtic Cornwall – which

was itself the wild west of England – he had tried to hook up with her, in as subtle a fashion as he could manage.

And he had failed. Maybe he hadn't been subtle enough? Maybe he had been too subtle? Maybe he could try again when they were all back at university. The holidays were nearly over. It was January the first, and it was – what? – three a.m.

Three a.m.!

Malcolm sat on a table and swigged from his bottle of beer. Amy Winehouse was still lamenting all the drugs that would kill her from the stereo. The music was so boomingly loud it was probably annoying the dead in Zennor churchyard, half a mile away.

Beer finished, Malcolm wondered vaguely, and groggily, where everyone else had gone. Rufus was presumably in one of the many bedrooms, with their amazing views of the sea, sleeping with Ally, as they had been doing ever since they had shared a bottle of vintage port on Boxing Day. Andrei had crashed with his girlfriend immediately after midnight. Josh and Paul were probably smoking upstairs, or chopping out a line. Or flaked out in their clothes.

Jojo turned over on the sofa, half-stirring, but still asleep. Her little denim skirt rode up as she did. Manfully, Malcolm resisted the temptation to linger; instead, he stood up, walked across the room, then wandered through the *enormous* mess that was the kitchen (they would have to hire some kids from the village to clear this up) and opened the kitchen door

to the large gardens that surrounded this great old house, Eagle's Nest.

The night was cold. The garden seemed empty. Then a dark and sudden figure loomed into view.

'*Jesus!*'

Freddy laughed, and casually dropped his glowing cigarette onto the grass, not bothering to crush it underfoot.

'Sorry, old boy. Did I frighten you?'

Malcolm was half-angry, yet half-relieved.

'Yes you did. What the fuck are you doing, skulking out here?'

'Well I came out to chuck up into the bushes, as is traditional on New Year's Eve.' Freddy smirked. 'That last joint was a bit of a serial killer. But the air revived me.'

Now the two of them stood together in the cold, looking out to the distant waves. The house, Malcolm recalled, had once been owned by artists. You could see that its position might inspire.

'So? Do tell. Did you manage to ravish Jojo yet?'

Malcolm sighed.

'Not exactly.'

'Ten days and not even a kiss? This is potentially worse than the Holocaust.'

'Maybe. I'll survive.' Malcolm gazed down, once more taking in the magnificent view, the vast granite rocks and the moonlit fields below, which led down to the Atlantic. 'Anyway, Freddy, mate, why are you still out here? You've been gone hours. It's freezing.'

Freddy put a finger to his lips.

'I wanted to sober up, as I said . . . and then . . .'

'Then what?'

Even in the semi-darkness he could see the sly frown on Freddy Saunderson's face.

'*Then I heard something.*'

'Duh?'

'Something weird. And I *keep* hearing it.'

'That's Amy Winehouse. She's dead.'

'No. Not the music. Something *else*.'

'But—'

'There it is again! Listen.'

Freddy Saunderson was, for once, not joking. From way up on the moors there came a wild and very loud scream. No, not a scream – a feral chorus of screams; yet distorted and shrieking, mingling with the howl of the wind.

Malcolm felt an urge to step back: to physically retreat.

'Jesus Christ. What is *that*?'

For a moment the noise abated, but then it returned. A distant choir, infantile and hideous. What the hell would make a sound like that?

At last, the noise ceased. The relative silence that followed seemed all the more oppressive. The thudding music in the house; the waves on the rocks below. Silence otherwise. Malcolm felt himself sobering up *very fast.*

Freddy pointed.

'Up there.'

He was surely right. The noise appeared to be coming from the moors *above* them: from Zennor Hill, with its great granite carns and its brace of ruined cottages.

They'd walked around that forbidding landscape the day before, in the driving rain and blustering wind. The hilltop was druidic and malignant, even by day.

Freddy's eyes flashed in the dark.

'Shall we go and have a look?'

'*What?* Are you nuts?'

'No. Are you *gay*?' Freddy laughed. 'Oh come on. Let's *investigate*. It'll be *fun*.'

Malcolm hesitated: quite paralysed. He was seriously unkeen on investigating that noise, but he also didn't want to appear a wuss in front of Freddy; he was wary of Freddy's cruel sense of humour, his lacerating jokes. If he didn't show he was up for this, Freddy might just humiliate him the next time he was feeling a little bored at the union bar.

Malcolm tried to smile.

'All right then. Let's see who's the real gaylord.'

'Excellent.' Freddy rubbed his hands together. 'We'd better get coats and stuff. This is like Enid Blyton, only with ritual murder.'

When they went back into the house, they found that Jojo had disappeared. Probably gone to bed? Malcolm was glad, in a protective sort of way. They turned off the music, grabbed their coats, boots and a pair of torches.

The path up to Zennor Hill began just outside the grounds. It had been treacherous the previous day; in

the moonlight it was even trickier. Ferns and brambles dragged at them, tussocks of grass tripped every step. Above them, the imponderable carn glowered, framed by myriad stars.

But the horrible noise had stopped.

For five, ten minutes they ascended the silent, narrow path up the hill. The view of Zennor village below, its Christmas lights twinkling in the wind, was beautiful and sad. Malcolm began to wonder if they had imagined it. Maybe it had been some curious sound effect, perhaps the fierce January wind whistling through the rocks: there were many strange rock formations up here.

But then it came again, and this time it was even worse. The sound curdled the thoughts in his mind. This scathing and animalistic wailing was surely the sound of somebody – or some*thing* – in terrible and angry pain?

Freddy turned, just ahead, his face a blur in the gloom.

'Pretty sure it's coming from the ruined cottage, the big one, Carn Cottage. Is that a fire inside?'

Malcolm desperately wanted to go back now. This had been a daft idea; and yet he was still scared of Freddy's put-downs. He was stuck.

The noise came, and went. This time it was so close it was like an exhalation – you could *feel* the scream on your face.

'There, look!' Freddy pointed his torch beam excitedly. 'Scoundrels!'

Figures. There were people walking away – no, *running away* – down a lane across the top of the hill, dark shapes. How many? It was too difficult to see. Who were they? *What* were they?

Freddy was laughing.

'Do you think it's devil-worshippers? We might be turned into newts!'

The figures were already out of sight, swallowed by the darkness. Had they been spooked by the noise? Or by the fire? Or by Malcolm and Freddy?

Malcolm waved a desperate hand. 'Look. Please. Can't we just go? This is dangerous. Let's just go, please. Call the cops.'

His protestations were futile; Freddy simply vaulted the low garden wall of the half-ruined cottage, and ran across the garden; he was followed by Malcolm, much less briskly.

As they neared the cottage, Malcolm could see there was indeed a fire burning inside the building. And it was a large fire, too, casting eerie orange shadows on the windows. The heat from within was palpable in the cold winter air.

'Freddy – wait – don't—'

It was too late. His friend was kicking at the old door; even as the infernal shrieking went on, and on.

'C'mon – open up!' Freddy laughed, 'Open up, in the name of all that's holy!' Now Freddy stepped back and kicked even harder at the splintering door, and at last it succumbed. The lock snapped and the old door swung open, revealing a roar of heat and howls and

things, strange black burning shapes, racing out at them, fleeing and burning—

A flaming creature leapt at Malcolm's face, and its claws sank deep. Malcolm's scream echoed down from the lonely carn, carried on the freezing wind.