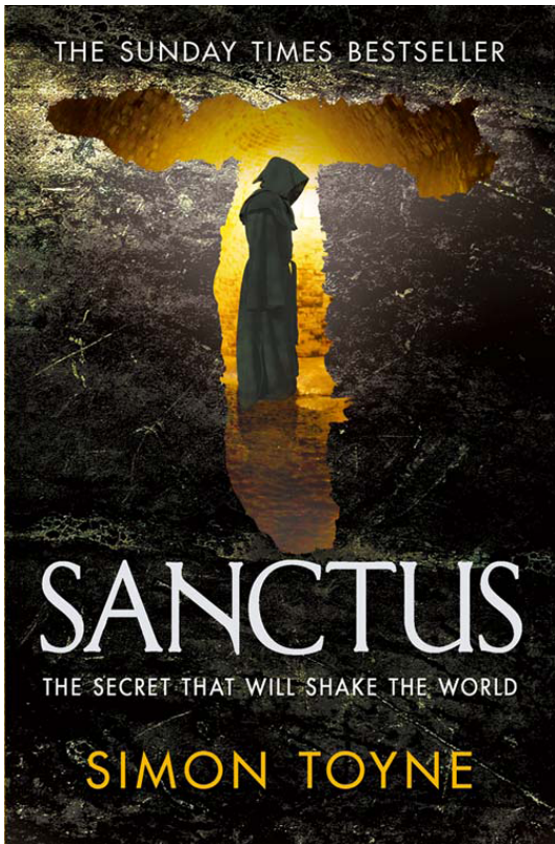


THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



# SANCTUS

THE SECRET THAT WILL SHAKE THE WORLD

SIMON TOYNE

Simon Toyne

**Sanctus**

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# Содержание

I	10
1	11
2	13
3	16
4	17
5	18
6	19
7	21
8	23
9	25
10	28
11	29
12	31
13	33
14	35
15	36
16	38
17	40
18	42
19	44
20	46
21	47
22	49
23	51
24	52
25	53
26	54
27	56
28	58
29	59
II	62
30	63
31	64
32	67
33	69
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	70

# SANCTUS

SIMON TOYNE

HARPER

*To K For the adventure*

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Part I](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Part II](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Part III](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)

[Chapter 67](#)

[Chapter 68](#)

[Part IV](#)

[Chapter 69](#)

[Chapter 70](#)

[Chapter 71](#)

[Chapter 72](#)

[Chapter 73](#)

[Chapter 74](#)

[Chapter 75](#)  
[Chapter 76](#)  
[Chapter 77](#)  
[Chapter 78](#)  
[Chapter 79](#)  
[Chapter 80](#)  
[Chapter 81](#)  
[Chapter 82](#)  
[Chapter 83](#)  
[Chapter 84](#)  
[Chapter 85](#)  
[Chapter 86](#)  
[Chapter 87](#)  
[Chapter 88](#)  
[Chapter 89](#)  
[Chapter 90](#)  
[Chapter 91](#)  
[Chapter 92](#)  
[Chapter 93](#)  
[Chapter 94](#)  
[Chapter 95](#)  
[Chapter 96](#)  
[Chapter 97](#)  
[Chapter 98](#)  
[Chapter 99](#)  
[Part V](#)  
[Chapter 100](#)  
[Chapter 101](#)  
[Chapter 102](#)  
[Chapter 103](#)  
[Chapter 104](#)  
[Chapter 105](#)  
[Chapter 106](#)  
[Chapter 107](#)  
[Chapter 108](#)  
[Chapter 109](#)  
[Chapter 110](#)  
[Chapter 111](#)  
[Chapter 112](#)  
[Chapter 113](#)  
[Chapter 114](#)  
[Chapter 115](#)  
[Chapter 116](#)  
[Chapter 117](#)  
[Chapter 118](#)  
[Chapter 119](#)  
[Chapter 120](#)  
[Chapter 121](#)  
[Part VI](#)

[Chapter 122](#)

[Chapter 123](#)

[Chapter 124](#)

[Chapter 125](#)

[Chapter 126](#)

[Chapter 127](#)

[Chapter 128](#)

[Chapter 129](#)

[Chapter 130](#)

[Chapter 131](#)

[Chapter 132](#)

[Chapter 133](#)

[Chapter 134](#)

[Chapter 135](#)

[Chapter 136](#)

[Chapter 137](#)

[Chapter 138](#)

[Chapter 139](#)

[Chapter 140](#)

[Chapter 141](#)

[Chapter 142](#)

[Chapter 143](#)

[Chapter 144](#)

[Part VII](#)

[Chapter 145](#)

[Chapter 146](#)

[Chapter 147](#)

[Read on for an extract from The Key](#)

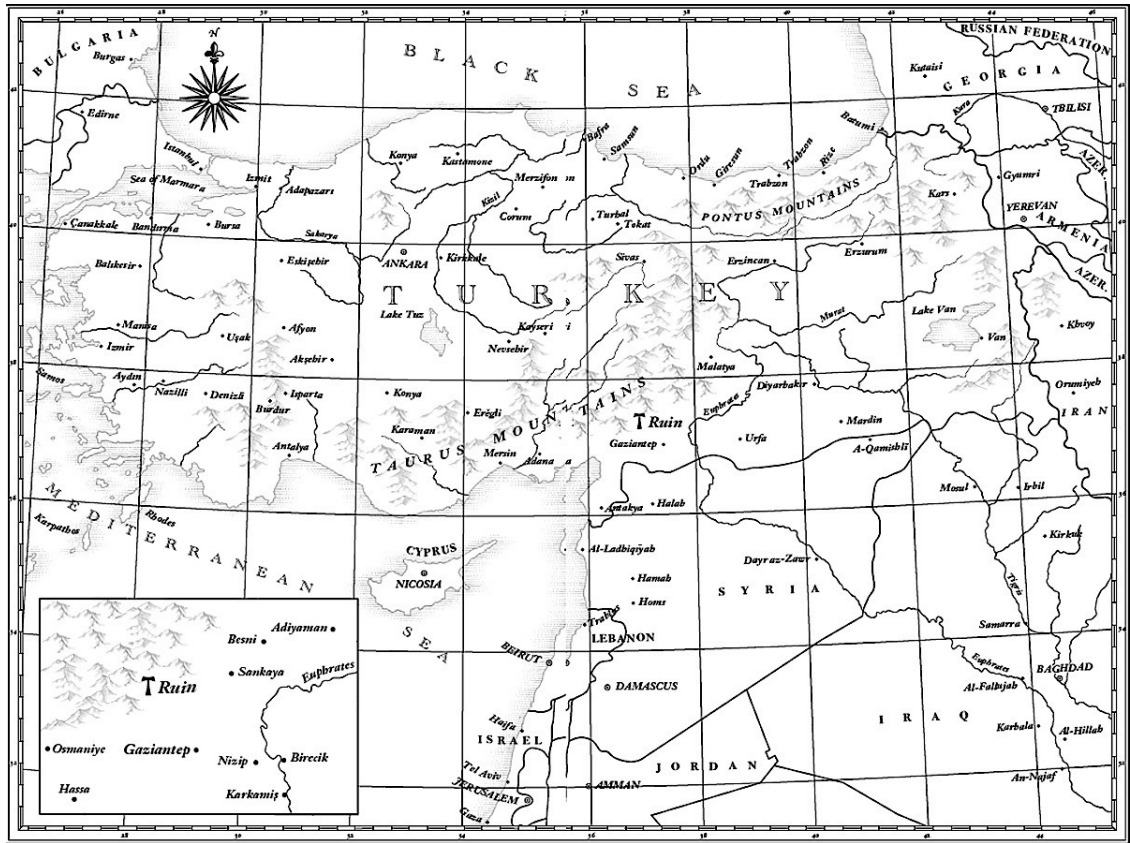
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# I

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, souged 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.

## 7

Over five thousand miles due west of Ruin, a slim blonde woman with fine, Nordic features stood in Central Park, one hand resting on the railing of Bow Bridge, the other holding a letter-sized manila envelope addressed to Liv Adamsen. It was crumpled from repeated handling, but not yet opened. Liv stared at the grey, liquid outline of New York reflected in the water and remembered the last time she'd stood there, with him, when they'd done the touristy thing and the sun had shone. It wasn't shining now.

The wind ruffled the lake's burnished surface, bumping together the few forgotten rowing boats tethered to the jetty. She pushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and looked down at the envelope, her sharp, green eyes dry from staring into the wind and the effort of trying not to cry. The envelope had appeared in her post nearly a week previously, nestling like a viper among the usual credit-card applications and pizza-delivery menus. At first she'd thought it was just another bill, until she spotted the return address printed on the lower corner. She got letters like this all the time at the *Inquirer*, hard copies of information she'd requested in the pursuit of whatever story she was currently working on. It was from the US Bureau of Vital Records, the one-stop store for public information on the Holy Trinity of most people's lives: birth, marriage and death.

She'd stuffed it into her bag, numb with the shock of its discovery, where it had been buried ever since, jostled by the receipts, notebooks, and make-up of her life, waiting for the right moment to be opened, though there never, ever could be one. Finally, after a week of glimpsing it every time she reached for her keys or answered her phone, something whispered in her mind and she took an early lunch and the train from Jersey to the heart of the big anonymous city, where no one knew her and the memories suited the circumstances, and where, if she lost it completely, nobody would bat an eyelid.

She walked now from the bridge, heading to the shoreline, her hand dipping into her bag and fishing out a slightly crushed pack of Lucky Strikes. Cupping her hand against the steady wind to light a cigarette, she stood for a moment on the edge of the rippling lake, breathing in the smoke and listening to the bump of the boats and the distant hiss of the city. Then she slid her finger under the flap of the envelope and ripped it open.

Inside was a letter and a folded document. The layout and language was all too familiar, but the words they contained were terribly different. Her eyes scanned across them, seeing them in clusters rather than whole sentences:

... *eight year absence* ...

... *no new evidence* ...

... *officially deceased* ...

She unfolded the document, read his name, and felt something give way inside her. The clenched emotions of the past years flexed and burst. She sobbed uncontrollably, tears born not only of the strangely welcome rush of grief, but also of the absolute loneliness she now felt in its shadow.

She remembered the last day she'd spent with him. Touring the city like a couple of rubes, they'd even hired one of the boats that now floated, cold and empty, nearby. She tried summoning the memory of it but could only manage fragments: the movement of his long, sinewy body uncoiling as he pulled the oars through the water; his shirt sleeves bunched up to his elbows, revealing white-blond hairs on lightly tanned arms; the colour of his eyes and the way the skin around them crinkled when he smiled. His face remained vague. Once it had always been there, conjured simply by uttering the spell of his name; now, more often than not, an impostor would appear, similar to the boy she had once known but never quite the same.

She struggled to bring him into focus, gripping the slippery substance of his memory until a true image finally snapped into place; him as a boy, struggling with oversized oars on the lake near

Granny Hansen's house in upstate New York. She'd cast them adrift, hollering after them, 'Your ancestors were Vikings. Only when you conquer the water will I let you come back ...'

They were on the lake all afternoon, taking it in turns to row and steer until the wooden boat felt like a part of them. She'd laid out a victory picnic for them in the sun-baked grass, called them Ask and Embla after the first people carved by Norse gods from fallen trees found on a different shore, then thrilled them with more stories from their ancestral homeland, tales of rampaging ice giants, and swooping Valkyries, and Viking burials in flaming longships. Later, in the dark of the loft where they waited for sleep, he had whispered that when he died in some future heroic battle he wanted to go the same way, his spirit mingling with the smoke of a burning ship and drifting all the way up to Valhalla.

She looked down at the certificate again, spelling out his name and the verdict of his official demise: a death not by spear or sword or selfless act of incredible valour, but simply by a period of absence, clerically measured and deemed substantial enough. She folded the stiff paper with practised creases, also remembered from childhood, squatted by the edge of the lake and placed the makeshift boat on its surface. She cupped her hand round the pointed sail and fired up her lighter. As the dry paper began to blacken and burn, she pushed it gently out towards the centre of the empty lake. The flames fluttered for a moment, searching for something to catch hold of, then sputtered out in the cold breeze. She watched it drift until the lapping of the gun-metal water eventually capsized it.

She smoked another cigarette, waiting for it to sink, but it just lay flat against the reflected image of the city, like a spirit caught in limbo.

*Not much of a Viking send-off ...*

She turned and walked away, heading to the train that would take her back to Jersey.

## 8

‘Just take a moment to listen, ladies and gentlemen,’ the tour guide implored his glassy-eyed charges as they stared up at the Citadel. ‘Listen to the babble of languages around you: Italian, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, different tongues all telling the history of this, the oldest continually inhabited structure in the world. And that same jumble of languages, ladies and gentlemen, brings to mind the famous Bible story of the Tower of Babel from the book of Genesis, built not for the worship of God, but for the glory of man, so God became angry and “confounded their language”, causing them to scatter throughout the nations of the earth, leaving the tower unfinished. Many scholars believe this story refers to the Citadel here at Ruin. Note also that the story is about a structure that was not built in praise of God. If you look up at the Citadel, ladies and gentlemen,’ he swept his arm dramatically upward at the massive structure filling everybody’s vision, ‘you will notice that there are no outward signs of religious purpose. No crosses, no depictions of angels, no iconography of any kind. However, appearances can be deceptive and, despite this lack of religious adornment, the Citadel of Ruin is undoubtedly a house of God. The very first bible was written inside its mysterious walls and has served as the spiritual foundation stone upon which the Christian faith was built.

‘Indeed, the Citadel was the original centre of the Christian church. The shift to the Vatican in Rome happening in AD 26 to give the rapidly expanding church a public focus. How many of you here have been to Vatican City?’

A smattering of reluctant hands rose up.

‘A few of you. And no doubt you would have spent your time there marvelling at the Sistine Chapel and exploring St Peter’s Basilica, or the papal tombs, or maybe even attending an audience with the Pope. Sadly, even though the Citadel here is reputed to contain wonders the equal of them all, you will not be able to see any of them, for the only people allowed inside this most secretive and sacred of places are the monks and priests who live here. So strict is this rule that even the great battlements you see carved into the solid stone sides of the mountain were not constructed by stonemasons or builders, but by the inhabitants of the holy mountain. It is a practice that has not only resulted in the uniquely dilapidated appearance of the place, but has given the city its name.

‘Yet despite its appearance, it is no Ruin. It is the oldest stronghold in the world and the only one that has never been breached, though the most infamous and determined invaders in history have tried. And why did they try? Because of the legendary relic the mountain supposedly contains: the holy secret of Ruin – the Sacrament.’ He let the word hang in the chill air for a second, like a ghost he had just conjured. ‘The world’s oldest and its greatest mystery,’ he continued, his voice now a conspiratorial whisper. ‘Some believe it to be the true cross of Christ. Some that it is the Holy Grail from which Christ drank and which can heal all wounds and bestow eternal life. Many believe the body of Christ Himself lies in state, miraculously preserved, somewhere within the carved depths of this silent mountain. There are also those who think it just legend, a story with no substance. The simple truth is, ladies and gentlemen, no one really knows. And, as secrecy is the very cornerstone upon which the Citadel’s legend has been built, I very much doubt that anyone ever will.

‘Now, if anyone has any questions,’ he said, his brisk change of tone communicating his sincere wish that nobody did, ‘then ask away.’

His small, darting eyes pecked the blank faces of the crowd staring up at the huge building, trying to think of something to ask. Normally nobody could, which meant they would then have a full twenty minutes to wander around, buy some souvenirs and take bad photos before rendezvousing back at the coach to head off somewhere else. The guide had just drawn breath to inform them of this fact when a hand shot up and pointed skywards.

‘What’s that thing?’ a red-faced man in his fifties asked in a blunt northern British accent. ‘That thing as looks like a cross?’

‘Well, as I’ve already mentioned, the Citadel has no crosses anywhere on its –’

He stopped short. Squinted against the brightening sky. Looked again.

There above him, clearly visible on the famously unadorned summit of the ancient fortress, was a tiny cross.

‘You know, I’m not ... sure what that is ...’ He trailed off again.

No one was listening anyway. They were all straining their eyes to get a better glimpse of whatever was perched on top of the mountain.

The guide followed suit. Whatever it was wavered slightly. It looked like a capital letter ‘T’. Maybe it was a bird, or simply a trick of the morning light.

‘It’s a man!’ Someone shouted from another group standing nearby. The guide looked across at a middle-aged man, Dutch by his accent, staring intently at the fold-out LCD screen of his video camera.

‘Look!’ The man leaned back so others could share his discovery.

The guide peered at the screen over the jostling scrum. The camera had been zoomed in as far as it would go and held unsteadily on a grainy, digitally enhanced image of a man dressed in what looked like a green monk’s habit. His long, dark-blond hair whipped round his bearded face, blown by the higher winds, but he stood perfectly still at the summit’s edge, his arms fully outstretched, his head tilted down, looking for all the world like a human cross – or a lonely, living figure of Christ.

## 9

In the foothills rising to the west of Ruin, in an orchard first planted in the late Middle Ages, Kathryn Mann led a group of six volunteers silently across the dappled ground. Each member of the group was dressed identically in an all-over body smock of heavy white canvas with a wide-brimmed hat dripping black gauze on every shoulder and shading every face. In the early morning light they looked like an ancient sect of druids on their way to a sacrifice.

Kathryn arrived at an upright oil drum covered with a scrap of tarpaulin and began removing the rocks holding it in place as the group fanned out silently behind her. The buoyant mood that had filled the minibus as it threaded its way through the empty, pre-dawn streets had long since evaporated. She removed the last of the weights. Someone held up the smoker for her. Usually the warmer the day the more active the bees became, and the more she needed to subdue them. Despite the building heat, Kathryn could already tell this hive was the same as the others. No hum sounded inside it and the dry red brick that served as a landing pad was empty.

She pumped a few cursory puffs of smoke into the bottom of the hive then lifted the tarp to reveal eight wood battens spaced evenly across the rim of the open drum. It was a simple top-bar hive; they could be made out of almost any old bits of salvage, as this one had been. The expedition to the orchard had been intended as a practical demonstration of basic bee-keeping, something the volunteers could put into practice in the various parts of the world they would be stationed in for the next year. But as dawn had broken and hive after hive was found and checked, the expedition turned into a first-hand encounter with something much more disturbing.

As the smoke cleared Kathryn lifted a side batten carefully from the drum and turned to the group. Hanging beneath it was a large, irregular-shaped honeycomb almost empty of honey; the hive had been successful and prosperous until very recently. Now, despite a handful of newly hatched worker bees crawling aimlessly across its waxy surface, the hive was deserted.

‘A virus?’ a male voice asked from under one of the shrouds.

‘No.’ Kathryn shook her head. ‘Take a look ...’

They formed a tight circle around her.

‘If a hive is infected by CPV or APV, chronic or acute bee paralysis virus, then the bees shiver and can’t fly so they die in or around the hive. But look at the ground.’

Six hats dipped and surveyed the spongy grass growing thickly in the shade of the apple tree.

‘Nothing. And look inside the hive.’

The hats rose, their wide brims pushing against each other.

‘If a virus had caused this then the bottom of the hive would be deep with dead bees. They’re like us; when they feel sick they head home and hunker down until they feel better. But there’s nothing there. The bees have just vanished. There’s something else here too.’

She held the batten higher and pointed at the lower section of the honeycomb where the hexagonal cells were covered with tiny wax lids.

‘Un-hatched larvae,’ Kathryn said. ‘Bees don’t normally abandon a hive if there are still young to be hatched.’

‘So what happened?’

Kathryn slotted the comb back into the silent hive. ‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But it’s happening everywhere.’ She began walking back to the boarded-up cider-house at the edge of the orchard. ‘Same thing’s been reported in North America, Europe, even as far east as Taiwan. So far no one’s managed to work out what’s causing it. The only thing everyone does agree on is that it’s getting worse.’

She pulled off her gauntlets as she reached the minibus and dropped them into an empty plastic crate. Everyone followed suit.

‘In America they call it Colony Collapse Disorder. Some people think it’s the end of the world. Einstein said that if the bee disappeared from the face of the earth then we’d only have four years left. No more bees. No more pollination. No more crops. No more food. No more man.’

She unzipped her gauze face protector and slipped off her hat revealing an oval face with pale, clear skin and dark, dark eyes. She had an ageless, natural air about her that was vaguely aristocratic and was regularly the object of the young male volunteers’ fantasies, even though she was older than many of their mothers. She reached up with her free hand, unclipped a thick coil of hair the colour of dark chocolate and shook it loose.

‘So what are they doing about it?’ The enquirer – a tall, sandy-haired boy from the American Mid-West – emerged from beneath a bee smock. He had the look most volunteers had when they first came to work for Kathryn at the charity: earnest, un-cynical, full of health and hope, shining with the goodness of the world. She wondered what he would look like after a year in the Sudan watching children die slowly from starvation, or in Sierra Leone persuading starving villagers not to plough fields their great-grandfathers had worked because guerrillas had sown them with landmines.

‘They’re doing lots of research,’ she said, ‘trying to establish a link between the colony collapses and GM crops, new types of nicotinoid pesticides, global warming, known parasites and infections. There’s even a theory that mobile phone signals might be messing around with the bees’ navigational systems, causing them to lose their bearings.’

She shrugged off her smock and let it fall to the ground.

‘But what do you think it is?’ Kathryn looked up at the earnest young man, saw the beginnings of a frown etching itself on to a face that had barely known a moment’s concern.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Maybe it’s a combination of all these things. Bees are actually quite simple creatures. Their society is simple too. But it doesn’t take much to upset things. They can cope with stress, but if life becomes too complex, to the point where they don’t recognize their society any more, maybe they abandon it. Maybe they’d rather fly off to their deaths than stay living in a world they no longer understand.’

She looked up. Everyone had stopped squirming out of their smocks and now stood with worried expressions clouding their young faces.

‘Hey,’ Kathryn said, trying to lighten the mood, ‘don’t listen to me; I just spend too much time on Wikipedia. Besides, you saw it’s not happening to all the hives; more than half of them are buzzing fit to burst. Come on,’ she said, clapping her hands together and immediately feeling like a nursery teacher leading a bunch of five-year-olds in a sing-song. ‘Still got lots to do. Pack away your smocks and start breaking out the tools. We need to replace those dead hives.’ She flipped the lid off another plastic crate lying on the grass. ‘There’s everything you need in here. Tools, instructions on how to make a basic top-bar hive, bits of old boxes and lengths of timber. But remember, in the field you’ll be building hives from whatever you can scavenge. Not that you’ll find much lying around where you’ll be going. People who don’t have anything in the first place don’t tend to throw anything away.’

‘You can’t use anything from the dead hives. If some kind of spore or parasite *did* cause the colony to fail, you’ll just import disaster to the new one.’

Kathryn pulled open the driver’s door. She needed to distance herself from the volunteers. Most of them came from educated, middle-class backgrounds, which meant they were well-meaning but impractical and would stand around discussing the best way of doing something for hours rather than actually doing it. The only way to cure them was to throw them in at the deep end and let them learn by their own mistakes.

‘I’ll check how you’re doing in half an hour. If you need me, I’ll be in my office.’ She slammed the door shut behind her before anyone could ask another question.

She could hear the dull clatter of tools being sorted and the first of many theoretical discussions. She turned on the radio. If she could hear what they were talking about, sooner or later the mother

in her would compel her to assist and that wouldn't help anybody. She wouldn't be there for them in the field.

A local radio station drowned out the noise of the volunteers with traffic news and headlines. Kathryn reached over to the passenger seat and picked up a thick manila file. On the cover was a single word – *Ortus* – and the logo of a four-petal flower with the world at its centre. It contained a field report detailing a complex scheme to irrigate and replant a stretch of desert created by illegal forest clearances in the Amazon Delta. She had to decide today whether the charity could afford it or not. It seemed that every year, despite fundraising being at an all-time high, there were more and more bits of the world that needed healing.

'And finally,' the radio newscaster said with that slightly amused tone they always reserve for novelty items at the end of the serious stuff, 'if you go down to the centre of Ruin today you're sure of a big surprise – because somebody dressed as a monk has managed to climb to the top of the Citadel.'

Kathryn glanced up at the slim radio buried in the dashboard.

'At the moment we're not sure if it's some kind of publicity stunt,' the newscaster continued, 'but he appeared this morning, shortly after dawn, and is now holding his arms out to form some kind of a ... a human cross.'

Kathryn's insides lurched. She turned the keys in the ignition and jammed the minibus into gear. She drew level with one of the volunteers and wound down her window.

'Got to go back to the office,' she called. 'Be back in about an hour.'

The girl nodded, her face registering mild abandonment anxiety, but Kathryn didn't see it. Her eyes were already fixed ahead, focusing on the gap in the hedge where the track fed out on to the main road that would take her back to Ruin.

## 10

Halfway between the gathering crowds and the Citadel's summit, the Abbot, tired from a night spent awaiting further news, sat by the glowing embers of the fire and looked at the man who had just brought it.

'We had thought the eastern face to be insurmountable,' Athanasius said, his hand smoothing his pate as he finished his report.

'Then we have at least learned something tonight, have we not?' The Abbot glanced over at the large window, where the sun was beginning to illuminate the antique panes of blue and green. It did nothing to lighten his mood.

'So,' he said at length, 'we have a renegade monk standing on the very summit of the Citadel, forming a deeply provocative symbol, one which has probably already been seen by hundreds of tourists and the Lord only knows who else, and we can neither stop him nor get him back.'

'That is correct,' Athanasius nodded. 'But he cannot talk to anyone whilst he remains up there, and eventually he must climb down, for where else can he go?'

'He can go to hell,' spat the Abbot. 'And the sooner that happens, the better for us all.'

'The situation, as I see it, is this ...' Athanasius persisted, knowing from long experience that the best way to deal with the Abbot's temper was simply to ignore it. 'He has no food. He has no water. There is only one way down from the mountain, and even if he waits for the cover of night the heat-sensitive cameras will pick him up as soon as he gets below the uppermost battlements. We have sensors on the ground and security on the outside tasked to apprehend him. What's more, he is trapped inside the only structure on earth from which no one has ever escaped.'

The Abbot shot him a troubled glance. 'Not true,' he said, stunning Athanasius into silence. 'People have escaped. Not recently, but people have done it. With a history as long as ours it is ... inevitable. They have always been captured, of course, and silenced – in God's name – along with everyone unfortunate enough to come into contact with them during their time outside these walls.' He noticed Athanasius blanch. 'The Sacrament must be protected.'

The Abbot had always considered it regrettable that his chamberlain did not possess the stomach for the more complex duties of their order. It was why Athanasius still wore the brown cassock of the lesser guilds rather than the dark green of a fully ordained Sanctus. Yet so zealous was he, and dedicated to his duty, that the Abbot sometimes forgot he had never learned the secret of the mountain, or that much of the Citadel's history was unknown to him.

'The last time the Sacrament was threatened was during the First World War,' the Abbot said, staring down at the cold grey embers of the fire as if the past was written there. 'A novice monk jumped through a high window and swam the moat. That's why it was drained. Fortunately he had not been fully ordained so did not yet know the secret of our order. He made it as far as Occupied France before we managed to ... catch up with him. God was with us. By the time we found him the battlefield had done our job for us.'

He looked back at Athanasius.

'But that was a different time, one when the Church had many allies, and silence could easily be bought and secrets simply kept; before the Internet enabled anyone to send information to a billion people in an instant. There is no way we could contain an incident like that today. Which is why we must ensure it does not happen.'

He looked back up at the window, now fully lit by the morning sun. The peacock motif shone a vibrant blue and green – an archaic symbol of Christ, and of immortality.

'Brother Samuel knows our secret,' the Abbot said simply. 'He must not leave this mountain.'

## 11

Liv pressed the buzzer and waited.

The house was a neat new-build in Newark, a few blocks back from Baker Park and close to the state university where the man of the house, Myron, worked as a lab technician. A low picket fence marked the boundaries of each neighbouring plot and ran alongside the single slab pathways to every door. A few feet of grass separated them from the street. It was like the American dream in miniature. If she'd been writing a different kind of piece she would have used this image, conjured something poignant from it; but that wasn't why she was here.

She heard movement inside the house, heavy footfalls across a slippery floor, and tried to arrange her face into something that didn't convey the absolute loneliness she'd felt since her lunchtime vigil in Central Park. The door swung open to reveal a pretty young woman so heavily pregnant she practically filled the narrow hallway.

'You must be Bonnie,' Liv said, in a cheerful voice belonging to someone else. 'I'm Liv Adamsen, from the *Inquirer*.'

Bonnie's face lit up. 'The baby writer!' She threw her door wide open and gestured down her spotless beige hallway.

Liv had never written about babies in her life, but she let that slide. She just kept the smile burning all the way into Bonnie's perfectly coordinated kitchenette where a fresh-faced man was making coffee.

'Myron, honey, this is the journalist who's going to write about the birth ...'

Liv shook his hand, her face beginning to ache from the effort of her smile. All she wanted to do was go home, crawl under her duvet and cry. Instead she surveyed the room, taking in the creaminess and the carefully grouped objects – the scented tea-lights blending the smell of roses with the coffee, the wicker boxes containing nothing but air – all sold in matching sets of three by the IKEA cash registers.

'Lovely home ...' She knew that's what was expected. She thought of her own apartment, choked with plants and the smell of loam; a potting shed with a bed, one ex-boyfriend had called it. Why couldn't she just live like regular folk, and be happy and content? She glanced out at their pristine yard, a green square of grass fringed with Cypress leylandii that would dwarf the house in two summers unless pruned drastically and often. Two of the trees were already yellowing slightly. Maybe nature would do the job for them. It was her knowledge of plants, and their healing properties in particular, that had landed Liv this gig in the first place.

'Adamsen, you know about plants and shit,' the conversation had started prosaically enough when Rawls Baker, proprietor and editor at large of the *New Jersey Inquirer* cornered her in the elevator earlier in the week. The next thing she knew she'd been cut from the crime desk, her usual beat on the darker side of the journalistic street, and charged with producing two thousand words under the heading 'Natural Childbirth – as Mother Nature Intended?' for the Sunday health pullout. She'd moonlighted before with the occasional gardening article, but she'd never done medical.

'Ain't a whole lot of medicine involved, far as I can see,' Rawls had said as he marched out of the elevator. 'Just find me someone relatively sane who nevertheless wants to have their baby in a pool or a forest glade without any pain relief bar plant extracts and give me the human interest story with a few facts. And they'd better be a citizen. I don't want to read about any damned hippies.'

Liv found Bonnie through her usual contacts. She was a traffic cop with the Jersey State Police, which took her about as far from being a hippy as you could get. You couldn't practise Peace and Love when dealing with the daily nightmare of the New Jersey turnpike. Yet here she was now, radiant on her L-shaped sofa, clutching the hand of her practical, lab scientist husband, talking passionately about natural childbirth like a fully paid-up earth mother.

*Yes* – it was her first child. Children, actually; she was expecting twins.

*No* – she didn't know what sex they were; they wanted it to be a surprise.

*Yes* – Myron did have some reservations, working in the scientific field and all, and *yes* – she had considered the usual obstetric route, but as women had been giving birth for generations without modern medicine she strongly felt it was better for the babies to let things take their natural course.

*She's having the baby*, Myron added in his gentle, boyish way as he stroked her hair and smiled lovingly down at her. *She doesn't need me to tell her what's best.*

Something about the touching intimacy and selflessness of this moment pierced the armour of Liv's good cheer and she was shocked to feel tears coursing down her cheeks. She heard herself apologizing as Bonnie and Myron both rushed to comfort her and managed to pull herself together long enough to finish the interview, feeling guilty that she had brought the dark cloud of her unhappiness into the bright sanctuary of their simple life.

She drove straight home and fell fully clothed into her unmade bed, listening to the drip of the irrigation system watering the plants that filled her flat and ensured, in the loosest sense, that she shared her life with other living things. She picked through the events of the day and wrapped herself tightly in her duvet, shivering with cold as if the solid ice of her loneliness could never be melted, and the warmth of a life like Bonnie and Myron's would never be hers.

## 12

Kathryn Mann swung the minibus into a small yard behind a large town house and brought it to a standstill amid a cloud of dust. This segment of the eastern part of the city was still known as the Garden District, though the green fields that gave it that name were long gone. Even from the back, the house had an aura of faded grandeur; the same flawless, honey-coloured stone that had built the public church and much of the old town peeped through in patches from beneath blackened layers of pollution.

Kathryn slipped out of the driver's seat and headed past an empty cycle-rack built on the site of the well that had once provided them with fresh water. She fumbled with her jingling key ring, heart still hammering from the stress of the several near misses she'd had while driving distractedly through the thickening morning traffic, found the right key, jabbed it into the lock and twisted the back door open.

Inside, the house was cool and dark after the glare of the early spring sunshine. The door swung shut behind her as she punched in the code to silence the alarm. She hurried down the dim hallway and into the bright reception area at the front of the building.

A bank of clocks on the wall behind the reception desk told her the time in Rio, New York, London, Delhi, Jakarta – everywhere the charity had offices. It was a quarter to eight in Ruin, still too early for most people to have started their working day. The silence that drifted down the elegant wooden staircase confirmed she was alone. She bounded up it, two steps at a time.

The five-storey house was narrow, in the style of most medieval terraces, and the stairs creaked as she swept up past the half-glazed office doors that filled the four lower floors of the building. At the top of the stairwell another reinforced door with thick steel panels hung heavily on its hinges. She heaved it open and stepped into her own private quarters. Crossing the threshold was like stepping back in time. The walls were wood-panelled and painted a soft grey, and the living room was filled with exquisite pieces of antique furniture. The only hint of the current century was offered by a small flat-screen TV perched on a low Chinese table in one corner.

Kathryn grabbed a remote from the ottoman and fired it in the direction of the TV as she headed towards a bookcase built into the far wall. The shelves stretched from floor to ceiling and were filled with the finest literature the nineteenth century had to offer. She pressed the spine of a black calfskin-bound copy of *Jane Eyre* and with a soft *click* the lower quarter sprang open to reveal a deep cupboard. Inside was a safe, a fax machine, a printer – all the paraphernalia of modern life. On the lowest shelf, resting on top of a pile of interior-design magazines, was the pair of binoculars her father had given her on her thirteenth birthday when he'd first taken her to Africa. She grabbed them and hurried back across the painted floorboards towards a skylight in the sloping ceiling. A roost of pigeons exploded into flight as she twisted it open and poked out her head. A blur of red roof tiles and blue sky smeared across her vision as she raised the binoculars then settled on the black monolith half a mile away to the west. The TV flickered into life behind her and started broadcasting the end of a story about global warming to the empty room. Kathryn leaned against the window frame to steady her hand and carefully traced a line up the side of the Citadel towards the summit.

Then she saw him.

Arms outstretched. Head tilted down.

It was an image she'd been familiar with all her life, only carved in stone and standing on top of a different mountain halfway across the world. She had been schooled in what it meant from childhood. Now, after generations of collective, proactive struggle attempting to kick-start the chain of events that would change mankind's destiny, here it was, unfolding right in front of her, the result of one man acting alone. As she tried to steady her shaking hand she heard the newsreader running through the headlines.

‘In the next half-hour we’ll have more from the world summit on climate change; the latest round-up of the world money markets; and we reveal how the ancient fortress in the city of Ruin has finally been conquered this morning – after these messages ...’

Kathryn took one last look at the extraordinary vision then dipped back through the skylight to find out what the rest of the world was going to make of it.

## 13

A slick car commercial was playing as Kathryn settled into an ancient sofa and glanced at the time signal on the TV screen. Eight twenty-eight; four twenty-eight in the morning in Rio. She pressed a speed-dial button and listened to the rapid beeps racing through a number with many digits, watching the commercial play out until, somewhere in the dark on the other side of the world, someone picked up.

‘*Ola?*’ A woman’s voice answered, quiet but alert. It was not, she noted with relief, the voice of someone who had just been woken up.

‘Mariella, it’s Kathryn. Sorry for calling so late ... or early. I thought he might be awake.’

She knew that her father kept increasingly strange hours.

‘*Sim, Senhora,*’ Mariella replied. ‘He has been for a while. I lit a fire in the study. There is a chill tonight. I left him reading.’

‘Could I talk to him please?’

‘*Certamente,*’ Mariella said.

The swishing of a skirt and the sounds of soft footsteps filtered down the line and Kathryn pictured her father’s housekeeper walking down the dark, parquet-floored hallway towards the soft glow of firelight spilling from the study at the far end of the modest house. The footsteps stopped and she heard a short muffled conversation in Portuguese before the phone was handed over.

‘Kathryn ...’ Her father’s warm voice drifted across the continents, calming her instantly. She could tell by his tone that he was smiling.

‘Daddy ...’ She smiled too, despite the weight of the news she carried.

‘And how is the weather in Ruin this morning?’

‘Sunny.’

‘It’s cold here,’ he said. ‘Got a fire going.’

‘I know, Daddy, Mariella told me. Listen, something’s happening here. Turn on your TV and tune it to CNN.’

She heard him ask Mariella to turn on the small television in the corner of his study and her eyes flicked over to her own. The shiny station graphic spun across the screen then cut back to the newsreader. She nudged the volume back up. Down the line she heard the brief babble of a game show, a soap opera and some adverts – all in Portuguese – then the earnest tones of the global news channel.

Kathryn glanced up as the image behind the newsreader became a green figure standing on top of the mountain.

She heard her father gasp. ‘My God,’ he whispered. ‘A Sanctus.’

‘So far,’ the newsreader continued, ‘there has been no word from inside the Citadel either confirming or denying that this man is anything to do with them, but joining us now to shed some light on this latest mystery is Ruinologist and author of many books on the Citadel, Dr Miriam Anata.’

The newscaster twisted in his chair to face a large, formidable-looking woman in her early fifties wearing a navy blue pinstripe suit over a plain white T-shirt, her silver-grey hair cut short and precise, in an asymmetrical bob.

‘Dr Anata, what do you make of this morning’s events?’

‘I think we’re seeing something extraordinary here,’ she said, tilting her head forward and peering over half-moon glasses at him with her cold blue eyes. ‘This man is nothing like the monks one occasionally glimpses repairing the battlements or re-leading the windows. His cassock is green, not brown, which is very significant; only one order wears this colour, and they disappeared about nine hundred years ago.’

‘And who are they?’

‘Because they lived in the Citadel, very little is known about them, but as they were only ever spotted high up on the mountain we assume they were an exalted order, possibly charged with protection of the Sacrament.’

The news anchor held a hand to his earpiece. ‘I think we can go live now to the Citadel.’

The picture cut to a new, clearer image of the monk, his cassock ruffling slightly in the morning breeze, his arms still stretched out, unwavering.

‘Yes,’ said the newsreader. ‘There he is, on top of the Citadel, making the sign of the cross with his body.’

‘Not a cross,’ Oscar whispered down the phonenumber as the picture zoomed slowly out revealing the terrifying height of the mountain. ‘The sign he’s making is the *Tau*.’

In the gentle glow of firelight in his study in the western hills of Rio de Janeiro, Oscar de la Cruz sat with his eyes fixed to the TV image. His hair was pure white in contrast to his dark skin, which had been burnished to its current leathery state by more than a hundred summers. But despite his great age, his dark eyes were still bright and alert and his compact body still radiated restless energy and purpose, like a battlefield general shackled to a peacetime desk.

‘What do you think?’ his daughter’s voice whispered in his ear.

He considered her question. He had been waiting for most of his life for something like this to happen, had spent a large part of it trying to make it so, and now he didn’t quite know what to do.

He rose stiffly from his chair and padded across the floor towards French doors leading on to a tiled terrace that dimly reflected the moonlight.

‘It could mean nothing,’ he said finally.

He heard his daughter sigh heavily. ‘Do you really believe that?’ she asked with a directness that made him smile. He’d brought her up to question everything.

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘No, not really.’

‘So?’

He paused, almost frightened to form the thoughts in his head and the feelings in his heart into words. He looked across the basin toward the peak of Corcovado Mountain, where *O Cristo Redentor*, the statue of Christ the Redeemer, held out its arms and looked down benignly upon the still-sleeping citizens of Rio. He’d helped to build it, in the hope that it would herald the new era. It had indeed become as famous as he had hoped, but that was all. He thought now of the monk, standing on top of the Citadel, the gesture of one man carried around the world in less than a second by the world’s media, striking an almost identical pose to the one it had taken him nine years to construct from steel and concrete and sandstone. His hand reached up and ran round the high collar of the turtleneck sweater he always wore.

‘I think maybe the prophecy is coming true,’ he whispered. ‘I think we need to prepare.’

## 14

The sun was now bright over the city of Ruin. Samuel watched the shadows shorten along the eastern boulevard, all the way to the fringe of red mountains in the distance. He barely felt the pain burning in his shoulders despite the strain of holding up his already exhausted arms for so long.

For some time now he had been aware of the activity below, the gathering crowds, the arrival of TV crews. The murmur of their presence occasionally drifted up to him on the rising thermals, making them sound uncannily close. But he only thought about two things. The first was the Sacrament, the second, the face of the girl in his past. As his mind cleared of everything else, they seemed to merge into a single powerful image, one that soothed and calmed him.

He glanced now over the edge of the summit, past the overhang he'd had to scramble up what seemed like days ago. Way down to the empty moat, over a thousand feet below him.

He slipped his feet into the slits he had cut just above the hem of his cassock then hooked his thumbs through two similar loops cut in the ends of each sleeve. He shuffled his legs apart, felt the material of his habit stretch tightly across his body, felt his hands and his feet take the strain. He took one last look down. Felt the updraught from the thermals as the morning sun heated the land. Heard the babble of voices on the strengthening breeze. Focused on the spot he had picked out just past the wall where a group of tourists stood beside a tiny patch of grass.

He shifted his weight.

Tilted forward.

And launched himself.

It took him three seconds to fall the same distance it had taken him agonizing hours to climb the night before. Pain racked his exhausted arms and legs as they strained against the thick woollen material of his cassock, fighting to keep it taut against the relentless rush of air. He kept his eyes fixed on the patch of grass, willing himself towards it.

He could hear screams now through the howl of the wind in his ears and pushed down hard with both arms, increasing the resistance, trying to tilt his body upwards and correct his trajectory. He saw people scattering from the patch of ground he was heading for. It hurtled towards him. Closer now. Closer.

He felt a sharp tug at his right hand as the loop ripped apart. The sudden lack of resistance twisted and threw him into a forward spin. He reached for the flapping sleeve, pulled it taut again. The wind immediately ripped it free. He was too weak. It was too late. The spin worsened. The ground was too close. He flipped on to his back.

And landed with a sickening crump five feet past the moat wall, just short of the patch of grass, arms still outstretched, eyes staring upwards at the clear blue sky. The screams that had started as soon as he stepped off the summit now swept through the crowd. Those closest to him either turned away or looked on in fascinated horror as dark blood blossomed beneath his body, running in rivulets down fresh cracks in the sun-bleached flagstones, soaking through the green cloth of his tattered cassock, turning it a dark and sinister shade.

## 15

Kathryn Mann gasped as she watched it happen, live on TV. One moment the monk was standing firmly on top of the Citadel; the next he was gone. The picture jerked downwards as the cameraman tried to follow his fall then cut back to the studio where the flustered anchorman fiddled with his earpiece, struggling to fill the dead air as the shock started to register. Kathryn was already across the room, raising the binoculars to her eyes. The starkly magnified view of the empty summit and the distant wail of sirens gave her all the confirmation she needed.

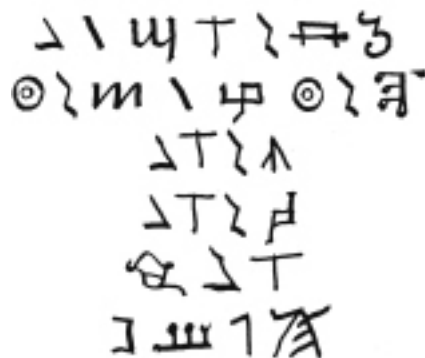
She ducked back inside and grabbed the phone from the sofa, stabbing the redial button as numbness closed round her. The answer machine cut in; her father's deep, comforting voice asked her to leave a message. She speed-dialled his mobile, wondering where he could have gone so suddenly. Mariella was obviously with him or she'd have picked up instead. The mobile connected. Cut straight to voicemail.

'The monk has fallen,' she said simply.

As she hung up, she realized she had tears in her eyes. She had watched and waited for the sign for so long, like generations of sentries before her. Now it seemed as if this too was just another false dawn. She took one last look at the empty summit then replaced the binoculars in the concealed cupboard and tapped a fifteen-digit sequence into the keyboard on the front of her safe. After a few seconds there was a hollow click.

A box the size of a laptop computer and about three times as thick lay behind the blast-proof titanium door, encased in moulded grey foam. Kathryn slid it free then carried it to the ottoman in front of the sofa.

The incredibly tough polycarbonate resin looked and felt like stone. She released the hidden catches holding the lid in place. Two fragments of slate lay inside, one above the other, each with faint markings etched on its surface. She looked down at the familiar pieces, carefully split from a seam by a prehistoric hand. All that remained of an ancient book, the carved symbols predated those of the Old Testament and could only hint at what else it might have contained. Its language was known as Malan, of the ancient tribe of Mala – Kathryn Mann's ancestors. In the gloom she looked at the familiar shape the lines made.



It was the sacred shape of the Tau, adopted by the Greeks as their letter 'T' but older than language, symbol of the sun and the most ancient of gods. To the Sumerians it was Tammuz; the Romans called it Mithras, to the Greeks it was Attis. It was a symbol so sacred it had been placed on the lips of Egyptian kings as they were initiated into the mysteries. It symbolized life, resurrection and blood sacrifice. It was the shape the monk had formed with his body as he stood on top of the Citadel for all the world to see.

She read the words now, translating them in her head, matching their meaning with the heady symbolism and the events of the past few hours.

*The one true cross will appear on earth  
All will see it in a single moment – all will wonder  
The cross will fall  
The cross will rise  
To unlock the Sacrament  
And bring forth a new age*

Beneath this last line she could see the tips of other beheaded symbols but the jagged edge of the broken slate drew an uneven line across them, preventing further knowledge of what they might have said.

The first two lines were easy enough to reconcile.

The true sign of the cross was the sign of the Tau, older by far than the Christian cross, and it had appeared on earth the moment the monk had spread his arms.

All had seen it in a single moment via the international news networks. All had wondered because it was extraordinary and unprecedented, and no one knew what it meant.

Then she faltered. She knew the text was incomplete, but she could not see a way past what remained.

The cross had indeed fallen, as the prophecy had foretold; but the cross had been a man.

She looked beyond the window. The Citadel was about eleven hundred feet from base to peak, and he had fallen down the sheer eastern face.

How could anyone possibly rise from that?

## 16

Athanasius clutched the loose bundle of documents to his chest as he rapped on the gilded door of the Abbot's chambers. There was no reply. He slipped inside and found, to his great relief, that the room was empty. It meant, for the moment at least, he did not have to converse with the Abbot about how the problem of Brother Samuel had now been solved. It had brought him no joy. Brother Samuel had been one of his closest friends before he had chosen the path of the Sancti and disappeared forever into the strictly segregated upper reaches of the mountain. And now he was dead.

He arrived at the desk and laid out the day's business, splitting the documents into two piles. The first contained the daily updates of the internal workings of the Citadel, stock-takes of provisions and schedules of works for the constant and ongoing repairs. The second much larger pile comprised reports of the Church's vast interests beyond the walls of the Citadel – anything from the latest discoveries at current archaeological digs worldwide; synopses of current theological papers; outlines of books that had been submitted for publication; sometimes even proposals for television programmes or documentaries. Most of this information came from various official bodies either funded or wholly owned by the Church, but some of it was gleaned by the vast network of unofficial informers who worked silently in every part of the modern establishment and were as much a part of the Citadel's tradition and history as were the prayers and sermons that made up the devotional day.

Athanasius glanced at the top sheet. It was a report submitted by an agent called Kafziel – one of the Church's most prolific spies. Fragments of an ancient manuscript had been discovered in the ruins of a temple at a dig in Syria and he recommended an immediate 'A and I' – Acquisition and Investigation to learn and neutralize any threat they may contain. Athanasius shook his head. Another piece of priceless antiquity would undoubtedly end up locked in the gloom of the great library. His feelings on this continued policy was no secret within the Citadel. He had argued, along with Brother Samuel and Father Thomas – inventor and implementer of so many improvements within the library, that the hoarding of knowledge and censorship of alternative ideas was the sign of a weak church in a modern and open world. The three of them had often talked in private of a time when the Citadel's great repository of learning might be shared with the outside for the greater good of God and man. Then Samuel had chosen to follow the ancient and secretive path of the Sancti and Athanasius could not help but feel that all their hopes had died with him. Everything Samuel had been associated with during his life in the Citadel would now be tainted.

He felt tears prick the corners of his eyes as he looked down at the day's documents and imagined the news they would bring in the weeks to come: endless reports regarding the monk who had fallen, and how the world perceived it. He turned and headed back to the gilded door, blotting his eyes with the back of his hand as he slipped from the Abbot's chambers and back into the mountain labyrinth. He needed to find somewhere private, where he could allow his emotions to run free.

Head down, he marched purposefully through the crisply air-conditioned tunnels. The wide, brightly lit thoroughfares narrowed into a dimly lit staircase leading to a narrow corridor beneath the great cathedral cave, lined on each side by doors to small private chapels. At the far end of the passage a candle burned in a shallow depression cut into the rock by one such door, denoting that the room beyond it was already occupied. Athanasius stepped inside. The few votive candles that lit the interior flickered in the wash of the closing door and light shimmered across the low, soot-stained ceiling and the T-shaped cross standing on a stone shelf cut into the far wall. A man in a plain black cassock was hunched in prayer before it.

The priest began to turn, but Athanasius did not need to see his face to know who it was. He dropped to the floor beside him and gripped him in a sudden and desperate embrace, the sounds of his sobs muffled by the thick material of his companion's robes. They held each other like this for long minutes, neither speaking, locked in grief. Finally Athanasius drew back and looked into

the round white face and intelligent blue eyes of Father Thomas, his black hair receding slightly and touched with grey at the temples, his cheeks glistening with tears in the candlelight.

‘I feel like all is lost.’

‘We are still here, Brother Athanasius. And what we three discussed in this room; that is not lost.’

Athanasius managed a smile, warmed by his friend’s words.

‘And we can at least remember Samuel as he truly was,’ Father Thomas said. ‘Even if others will not.’

## 17

The Abbot stood in the centre of the *Capelli Deus Specialis* – the Chapel of God’s Holy Secret – high in the mountain. It was a small, low-ceilinged space, like a crypt, though it was so dark it was hard to make out how big it was. It had been cut by hand out of solid rock by the founders of the Citadel and remained unchanged ever since, the walls still bearing the crude marks of their primitive tools. The Abbot could smell the metallic tang of blood hanging in the air from the previous night’s ceremony, rising from grooves cut in the floor that shone wetly in the weak candlelight. He traced the channels towards the altar where the outline of the Sacrament could just be seen rising out of the darkness.

At the foot of the altar he noticed a twist of new growth curling from the rock floor, the thin tendril of a blood vine, the strange red plant that grew around the Sacrament, springing up faster than it could be rooted out. There was something about the sheer fecundity of the plant that disgusted him. He was about to move towards it when he heard the deep rumble of the huge stone door rolling open behind him. The thick air inside the chapel stirred as two people entered. The candles shuddered in their molten pools of tallow and light danced across the sharp instruments that lined the walls. The door rumbled back into place and the candle flames settled, hissing softly as tallow bubbled against hot wicks.

Both men wore the long beards and green cassocks of the Sacramental order, but there was a subtle difference in their bearing. The shorter of the two stood slightly back, his eyes fixed on the other, his hand resting on the T-shaped Crux tucked into his rope belt; the second stood with his head slightly down, eyes lowered, shoulders stooping as if the weight of the cassock itself was still too much to bear.

‘Well, Brothers?’

‘The body landed beyond the boundaries of our jurisdiction,’ the shorter monk said. ‘There was no way we could secure it.’

The Abbot closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. He had hoped the news would lift his mood, not worsen it. He opened his eyes again and regarded the Sanctus who had not yet spoken. ‘So,’ he said, in a voice that was soft yet full of threat, ‘where is he now?’

‘The city morgue.’ The monk’s eyes did not rise above the Abbot’s chest. ‘We think they are performing a post-mortem.’

‘You *think* they are performing a post-mortem,’ the Abbot spat. ‘Don’t *think* they are doing anything; *know* it, or say nothing. Do not come into this room and bring me your thoughts. When you come in here, you bring only the truth.’

The monk fell to his knees.

‘Forgive me, Father Abbot,’ he pleaded. ‘I have failed you.’

The Abbot looked down at him in disgust. Brother Gruber was the man who had thrown Brother Samuel into the cell from which he had subsequently escaped. It was Gruber’s fault the Sacrament had been compromised.

‘You have failed us all,’ the Abbot said.

He turned and gazed once more upon the secret of their order. He could almost feel the eyes of the world turning towards the Citadel, burning through the rock like X-rays in an unquenchable search for what lay within. He was tired from the long night’s wait, and irritable with it, and the cuts ached beneath his cassock. He’d begun to notice that, even though his ceremonial wounds healed as quickly as they always had, they pained him for longer and longer each time. Age was creeping up on him – slowly maybe, but gaining ground.

He didn't want to be angry with the cowering monk. He just wanted this situation to pass and the fickle gaze of the world to move on to something else. The Citadel had to weather the siege, as it always had.

'Stand up,' he said gently.

Gruber obeyed, his eyes still lowered so he didn't see the Abbot nod to the monk standing behind him, or the man remove his Crux and pull the top away to reveal the bright blade of the ceremonial dagger sheathed within.

'Look at me,' the Abbot said.

As Gruber raised his head to meet the Abbot's gaze the monk slashed quickly across his exposed neck.

'Knowledge is everything,' the Abbot said, stepping back to avoid the fountain of arterial blood pumping from Gruber's neck.

He watched the look of surprise on Gruber's face turn to confusion as his hand fluttered up to the neat line across his throat. Saw him sink back to his knees as the life flooded out of him and into the channels in the floor.

'Find out exactly what has happened to the body,' the Abbot said. 'Contact someone in the city council, or the police division, someone who has access to the information we require and is prepared to share it with us. We need to know what conclusions are being drawn about Brother Samuel's death. We need to know where the events of this morning may be leading. And above all we need to get Brother Samuel's body back.'

The monk stared down at Gruber, twitching feebly on the floor of the chapel, the rhythmic spurts from his neck weakening with every beat of his dying heart.

'Of course, Brother Abbot,' the short monk said. 'Athanasius has already begun to deal with press enquiries through his outside intermediary. And I believe – I mean, I *know* there has been some contact from the police.'

The Abbot felt the muscles tighten in his jaw as he sensed the eyes of the world upon him once again.

'Keep me informed,' he said. 'And send Athanasius to me.'

The monk nodded. 'Of course, Brother Abbot,' he said. 'I will pass word that you wish to see him in your chambers.'

'No.' The Abbot stepped over to the altar and wrenched the blood vine out at the root. 'Not there.'

He glanced up at the Sacrament. His chamberlain was not a Sanctus so did not know its identity, but if he was going to be effective in containing the current situation he needed to be more aware of what they were dealing with.

'Get him to meet me in the great library.' He moved towards the exit, dropping the vine on Brother Gruber's corpse as he stepped over it. 'He will find me in the forbidden vault.'

He grabbed a wooden stake set into the door and heaved against it. The rumble of stone over stone echoed through the chapel as the cool sweet air of the antechamber spilled through the opening. The Abbot looked back to where Gruber lay, his face pallid against a pool of blood in which the reflected candles danced.

'And get rid of that,' he said.

Then he turned and walked away.

## 18

The city coroner's office was housed in the cellars of a stone building which had, at various periods in its history, been a gunpowder store, an ice house, a fish locker, a meat store and briefly, for a short time in the sixteenth century, a prison. Its robust security and subterranean coolness were perfect for the new department of pathology the city council decided to create at the tail end of the 1950s. Here in these retro-fitted, vaulted cellars, on the middle of three old-style ceramic post-mortem tables, the broken body of Brother Samuel now lay, starkly illuminated and under the scrutiny of two men.

The first was Dr Bartholomew Reis, the attendant pathologist, the white lab coat of his profession worn loose over the black clothes of his social tribe. He had arrived from England four years previously on an international police exchange programme, his Turkish father and dual nationality easing the paperwork. He was supposed to stay for six months, but had never quite managed to leave. His long hair was also black, thanks more to chemistry than nature, and hung on either side of his thin, pale face like a pair of partly opened curtains. Despite his sombre appearance, however, Reis was renowned throughout every division of the Ruin police force as being the most cheerful pathologist anyone had ever met. As he often said, he was thirty-two, earning good money, and while most Goths only dreamed of making a living amongst the dead, he was actually doing it.

The second man appeared much less at ease. He stood slightly behind Reis, chewing on a fruit-and-nut breakfast bar he'd found in his pocket. He was taller than Reis but looked crumpled somehow, his summer-weight grey suit hanging loosely from shoulders that drooped under the weight of nearly twenty years' service. His thick, dark hair, shot through with silver, was pushed back from an intelligent face that managed to appear both amused and sad, a pair of half-moon tortoiseshell glasses halfway down his long, hawkish nose, completing the image of a man who looked more like a tired history professor than a Homicide detective.

Inspector Davud Arkadian was something of an oddity within the Ruin police force. His undoubted abilities should easily have raised him at this advanced stage of his career to the rank of chief inspector or beyond. Instead he'd spent the larger part of his life as a police officer watching a steady procession of lesser men get promoted above him, while he remained lumped in with the general raft of anonymous career detectives marking the days until their pensions kicked in. Arkadian was much better than that, but he'd made a choice early in his career that had cast a very long shadow over the rest of it.

What he'd done was meet a woman, fall in love and then marry her.

Being a happily married detective was rare enough, but Arkadian had met his wife while working vice as a sub-inspector. When he met his bride-to-be she was a prostitute preparing to testify against the men who had trafficked her from what was then the Eastern Bloc, then enslaved her. The first time he saw her he thought she was the bravest, the most beautiful and most scared person he'd ever met. He was detailed to look after her until the case came to trial. He often joked that he should bill for all the overtime because, twelve years later, he was still doing it. In that time he'd helped her kick the drugs they'd hooked her on, paid for her to go back to school to gain her teacher's diploma, and restored her to the life she should have been leading in the first place. In his heart he knew it was the best thing he'd ever done, but his head also knew the price that came with it. High-ranking police officers couldn't be married to ex-prostitutes, no matter how reformed they were. So he remained a mid-level inspector, where the public scrutiny was less, occasionally picking up a case worthy of his abilities, but often catching the tricky ones no one more senior wanted to touch.

He looked down now at the monk's crumpled form, the lenses in his glasses magnifying his warm brown eyes as he assessed the details of the corpse. The forensics team had swept the body for trace evidence but had left it clothed. The rough green habit was dark with cold coagulated blood. The

arms that had stretched out for so long making the sign of the cross were now arranged by his sides, the double loop of rope around his right wrist coiled into a neat pile by his ravaged hand. Arkadian took in the grisly scene and frowned. It wasn't that he didn't like autopsies – he'd certainly been to enough of them; he just wasn't sure why he had been specifically asked to attend this one.

Reis tucked his lank black hair into a surgical cap, logged on to the computer on the mobile stand by his side and opened a new case file. 'What do you make of the noose?' he said.

Arkadian shrugged. 'Maybe he was going to hang himself but decided it was too mundane.' He launched the balled-up wrapper of his fruit bar across the room, where it bounced off the rim of the bin and skittered underneath a workbench. It was clearly going to be one of those days. His gaze flicked to a TV monitor on the far wall, tuned to a news channel and showing footage of the monk on the summit.

'This is a new one on me.' Arkadian retrieved his wrapper. 'First watch the TV show. Now dissect the corpse ...'

Reis smiled and angled the flat computer screen towards him. He unhooked a wireless headset from the back of the monitor, slipped it over his head and twisted a thin microphone in front of his mouth before pressing a red square in the corner of the screen. It started to flash; an MP3 file had begun to record directly into the case file.

## 19

Oscar de la Cruz sat near the back of the private chapel, his habitual white turtleneck sweater worn under a dark brown linen suit. His head was slightly lowered as he offered up a silent prayer for the monk, not knowing he was already dead. Then he opened his eyes and looked around at the place he had helped build over seventy years before.

There were no adornments in the chapel, not even windows; the soft light emanated from a network of concealed lamps that gradually brightened the higher you looked – a piece of architectural sleight of hand intended to draw the eye upwards. It was an idea he had stolen from the great gothic churches of Europe. He figured they'd taken much more from him and his people.

Oscar could see another twenty or so people holding their own private vigils; other night owls like himself, people of the secret congregation who had caught the news and been drawn here to pray and reflect on what the sign could mean to them and their kind. He recognized most of them, knew some of them pretty well, but then the church wasn't for everyone. Few people even knew of its existence.

Mariella sat nearby, wrapped in her own private contemplation, uttering a prayer in a language older than Latin. When she finished she caught Oscar's eye.

'What were you praying for?' he asked.

She smiled quietly and looked towards the front of the chapel where a large Tau was suspended above the altar. In all the years they'd been coming here, she had never once told him.

He remembered the first time he'd met the shy eight-year-old girl who'd blushed when he spoke to her. The chapel had been young then and the statue it was built inside had carried the hopes of their tribe. Now a man halfway round the world held them in his outstretched arms.

'When you built this place,' Mariella whispered, dragging his attention back to the silent room, 'did you really believe it would change things?'

Oscar considered the question. The statue of Christ the Redeemer had been built at his suggestion, and with the help of money he had been instrumental in raising. It had been sold to the people of Brazil as a great symbol for their Catholic nation but was in fact an attempt to bring the ancient prophecy of a much older religion to pass.

*The one true cross will appear on earth*

*All will see it in a single moment – all will wonder*

When it was finally revealed to the assembled world media, after nine years of construction, images of it appeared on newsreels and in papers around the world. It wasn't quite a single moment, but all did see it and the gushing encomia testified to their wonder.

But nothing happened.

In the years that followed, its fame had grown. But still nothing had happened; at least not what Oscar had hoped. He had succeeded in creating nothing more than a landmark for the Brazilian tourist board. His one consolation was that he'd also succeeded in building a secret chapel in the foundations of the huge statue, carved into the rock in another neat reflection of the Citadel, a church within a mountain.

'No,' he said, in answer to Mariella's question. 'I *hoped* it would change things, but I can't say I believed it would.'

'And what about the monk? Do you believe he will?'

He looked at her. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, I do.'

Mariella leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. 'That's what I was praying for,' she said. 'And now I will pray that you are right.'

There was a sudden disturbance at the front of the church.

A small group of worshippers were huddled by the altar, their intense conversation whispering through the chapel like a strengthening breeze. One broke away and began walking up the aisle towards them. Oscar recognized Jean-Claude Landowski, the grandson of the French sculptor who had built the structure in which they all now prayed. He paused by each worshipper and whispered solemn words.

Oscar watched the body language of the recipients of Jean-Claude's news, and felt Mariella's hand grab his. He did not need to hear the words to know what was being said.

## 20

‘OK,’ Reis began in his best bedside manner. ‘Case number one-eight-six-nine-four slash “E”. The time is ten-seventeen. Attending are myself, Dr Bartholomew Reis of the city coroner’s office, and Inspector Davud Arkadian of the Ruin City Police. The subject is an unidentified white Caucasian male, approximately thirty years of age. Height –’ he withdrew the steel tape measure that was built into the table and extended it sharply ‘– six feet two inches. First visual assessment is commensurate with eyewitness reports, detailed in the case file, of a body that has sustained major trauma following a substantial fall from height.’

Reis frowned. He tapped the flashing red square to pause the recording.

‘Hey, Arkadian,’ he called in the general direction of the coffee pot, ‘why’d they kick this in your direction? This guy threw himself off a mountain and wound up dead. Not much detecting called for, far as I can see.’

Arkadian exhaled slowly and slam-dunked the balled-up wrapper emphatically into the waste basket. ‘Interesting question.’ He poured two mugs of coffee. ‘Unfortunately, this wasn’t one of those “sneak off and do it in private” kind of suicides.’ He grabbed the milk carton and poured most of its contents into one of the mugs. ‘And our man here didn’t just throw himself off *a* mountain; he threw himself off *the* mountain. And you know how much the people in charge hate it when anything, how shall we say, “un-family friendly” happens there. They think it might put people off coming to this beautiful city of ours, which will impact distressingly on sales of Holy Grail T-shirts and “True Cross of Christ” bumper stickers – and they don’t like that. So they have to be seen to be doing everything they can to respond to such a tragic incident.’

He handed Reis a very white coffee in a very black mug.

Reis nodded slowly. ‘So they throw an inspector at it.’ He took a slurp of his homemade latte.

‘Exactly. This way they can hold a press conference and announce that, having brought all the expertise and diligence of the police force to bear, they have discovered that a guy dressed as a monk threw himself off the top of the Citadel and died. Unless, of course, *you* discover otherwise ...’

Reis took another long gulp of his tepid coffee and handed the mug back to Arkadian.

‘Well,’ he said, hitting the red button to restart the audio file. ‘Let’s find out.’

## 21

Kathryn Mann sat in her office on the second floor of the townhouse surrounded by piles of paperwork in a variety of languages. As usual her door was open to the hallway and through it she heard the footfalls on wooden floors, phones ringing and fragments of conversation as people drifted in to start the working day.

She'd sent someone back to the orchard to pick up the volunteers. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts and feelings for a while, and right now she just couldn't face another earnest discussion about dead bees. She thought of the empty hives in the light of the monk's death and it made her shudder. The ancients had been big on the omens contained in the uncharacteristic behaviour of animals. She wondered what they would have made of the supernatural events that were taking place in the world today: melting ice caps, tropical weather in formerly temperate zones, unprecedented tidal waves and hurricanes, coral reefs poisoned by acidic seas, disappearing bees. They would have thought it was the end of the world.

On the desk in front of her lay the field report she'd rescued from the passenger seat of the minibus. It had done little to lighten her mood. She'd only read half of it and already knew that it was going to be too expensive to fund. Maybe this was just one more bit of the world they were going to have to let wither and die. She stared hard at the carefully annotated diagrams and charts outlining initial building costs and projected tree growth, but in her head she was seeing symbols etched on to fragments of slate, and the shape made by the monk before he fell.

'Did you see the news?'

Startled, Kathryn looked up into the bright, clear face of a willowy girl beaming at her from the doorway. She tried to remember her name but the turnover of people in the building was so rapid she never trusted herself to get it right. Rachel maybe – or was it Rebecca? Here on a three-month placement from an English university.

'Yes,' Kathryn replied. 'Yes, I saw it.'

'Traffic's rammed out there. That's why I was late getting in.'

'Don't worry about it.' Kathryn dismissed the confession with a wave and returned to the dossier. The morning's news, which hung so heavily around her, was clearly just an inconvenience for most people – something to be gossiped over, wondered at and then forgotten.

'Hey, you want a coffee?' the girl asked.

Kathryn looked back up at her fresh, untroubled face and suddenly remembered her name. 'That'd be great, Becky,' she said.

The girl's face lit up. 'Cool.' With a whip-crack of auburn ponytail she turned and ran down to the kitchen.

Most of the work carried out by the organization was done by volunteers like Becky; people of all ages, giving freely of their time, not because of any religious obligation or national pride, but because they loved the planet they lived on and wanted to do something to look after it. That's what the charity did: brought water to places that had dried out; planted crops and trees in land that had been blighted by war or poisoned by industry; though this was not how Ortus had started, and it was not the work it had always done.

Her desk phone rang.

'Ortus. Can I help you?' she said, as brightly as she could manage.

'Kathryn,' Oscar's warm voice rumbled in her ear. Instantly she felt a little better.

'Hey, Daddy,' she said. 'Where've you been?'

'I was praying.'

'Did you hear?' She didn't quite know how to frame the question. 'Did you hear that he ... that the monk ...'

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I heard.’

She swallowed hard, trying to hold back the emotion.

‘Don’t despair,’ her father said. ‘We should not give up hope.’

‘But how can we not?’ She glanced up at the door and lowered her voice. ‘The prophecy can no longer be fulfilled. How can the cross rise again?’

The crackle of the transatlantic line filled the long pause before her father spoke again.

‘People have come back from the dead,’ he said. ‘Look in the Bible.’

‘The Bible is full of lies. You taught me that.’

‘No, that I did not teach you. I told you of specific and deliberate inaccuracies. There is still much in the official Bible that is true.’

The line went silent again save for the rising hiss of long-distance interference.

She wanted to believe him, she really did; but in her heart she felt that to carry on blindly hoping everything was going to be OK was not much different from closing your eyes and crossing your fingers.

‘Do you really believe the cross will rise again?’

‘It might,’ he said. ‘It’s hard to believe, I admit. But if you’d told me yesterday that a Sanctus would appear from nowhere, climb to the top of the Citadel and make the sign of the Tau, I would have found that equally hard to believe. Yet here we are.’

She couldn’t fault him. She rarely could. It was why she wished he had been around to talk to when the news had first broken. Maybe then she wouldn’t have thought herself into such a melancholic state.

‘So what do you think we should do?’ she asked.

‘We should watch the body. That is the key. It is the cross. And if he does rise again, we need to protect him from those who would do him harm.’

‘The Sancti.’

‘My belief is they will try and reclaim the body as soon as possible, then destroy it to end the prophetic sequence. As a Sanctus he will have no family, therefore no one will step forward to claim him.’

They both lapsed into silence as they contemplated what might happen if this came to pass. Kathryn imagined him lying in a dark, windowless room somewhere inside the Citadel as somehow, miraculously, his broken body began to mend. Then out of the shadows hooded figures started to emerge, green-clad men with daggers drawn and other instruments of torture to hand.

On the other side of the world her father pictured similar images, though his were not drawn from imagination. He had witnessed with his own eyes what the Sancti were capable of.

## 22

Athanasius had a profound dislike for the great library.

There was something about its trapped, anonymous darkness and labyrinthine chambers he found deeply claustrophobic and sinister. Nevertheless it was there the Abbot had summoned him, so it was there he now made his way.

The library occupied a system of caves about a third of the way up the mountain, chosen by the original architects of the Citadel because they were sufficiently dark and well ventilated to prevent sunlight and damp fading or corrupting the ancient scrolls and manuscripts. As the caves had filled with more and more priceless texts, it was decided that the preservation of such treasures could no longer be left simply to the darkness and a dry breeze, so a schedule of improvements had begun. The library now occupied forty-two chambers of varying sizes, and contained easily the most valuable and unique collection of books anywhere in the world. There was a standing, somewhat bitter joke among international religious scholars and academics that it was the greatest collection of ancient texts no one had ever seen.

Athanasius approached its solitary entrance with his usual feeling of gnawing unease. A cold blue light swept across his palm as the scanner checked and verified his identity before a door slid open, allowing him into an airlock. He stepped inside and heard the door slide shut behind him. His claustrophobia deepened. He knew it would not leave him until he had exited the library. A light blinked above a second scanner, indicating that the airlock was doing whatever it needed to do to ensure no tainted air accompanied him into the hermetically sealed world beyond the final door. He waited. Felt the desiccated air already sucking moisture from the back of his throat. The light stopped blinking. A second door slid open and Athanasius stepped into the library.

The moment he passed through into the darkness, a circle of light grew and enveloped him. It extended just a few feet in every direction and matched his movements exactly, keeping him at its centre as he strode across the reception hall towards the archway leading into the main body of the library. As well as the carefully controlled climate – a constant sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit and thirty-five per cent relative humidity – the lighting was a marvel of modern engineering. It too had been progressively updated over the generations, with guttering candles making way for oil lamps, which in turn made way for electricity. The system of lighting it now utilized was not only the most advanced in the world, it was the only one of its kind. Like most of the recent technological improvements, it had been devised and engineered by one man: Athanasius's great friend, Father Thomas.

From the moment Father Thomas had entered the Citadel over a decade previously he had been treated differently from the usual intake. Like most of the inhabitants of the mountain, his past was unknown, but whatever he had done in his life outside, it became immediately clear that he was an expert in the preservation of ancient documents and a genius with electronics. In his first year he had been given special authority, by the Prelate himself, to totally overhaul and update the library. It was a task that took him nearly seven years to complete, the first year alone spent purely on experimenting with different light frequencies and studying their effect on various inks and writing surfaces. The lighting system he had then designed and built was brilliant in its simplicity and had been inspired by the very first scholars who'd walked through the library with a single candle illuminating only their immediate surroundings, whilst leaving the rest of the collection in total darkness.

Using a system of movement, pressure and heat sensors, Father Thomas had created an environment in which anyone entering the library was tracked by a central computer that provided a narrow column of light, sufficient to illuminate no more than their immediate surroundings. This light would then follow them throughout the library, constantly pushing away the darkness as they walked through it, without contaminating any area in which they were not working. The system was

so sensitive that each monk could be identified by tiny differences in their body temperature and slight fluctuations in air displacement due to their unique size and weight. It meant the computer could not only monitor the movement of each visitor, it also knew who they were and where they went, so acted as an added security measure policing the monks' usage of the library.

Athanasius left the entrance hall now, following the thin filament of dim guide lamps set into the floor, marking the way through the darkness. Occasionally he came across other scholars flitting around like fireflies, trapped in their personal haloes of light, each one dimmer the further he progressed into the great library.

Father Thomas's other great innovation had been to zone the library according to age, ink and paper types, and to adjust the lighting in each area to suit their particular properties. So, as Athanasius ventured deeper into the places where increasingly older and more fragile texts were kept, so his own circle of light became gradually more muted and orange. It was as if he were walking backwards through time, experiencing the same conditions that would have illuminated the documents when they had first been written.

Furthest from the entrance was the smallest and darkest chamber of all. The oldest, most delicate and most precious texts were housed here. Scraps of vellum worn thin by time and ancient words scratched lightly on brittle stones. The glow in the forbidden vault, on the very rare occasions it shone at all, was the deep and sombre red of the embers of a dying fire.

Only three people had perpetual right of entry to this room: the Prelate, the Abbot and Father Malachi, the chief librarian. Others could be granted special authority by any of these three to enter the vault, but it happened rarely. If someone entered the space without the correct authorization, either by design or mistake, the lights would remain off and a silent alarm would alert the guard permanently stationed by the entrance who would surge through the dark halls to deal with the intruder.

Punishment for entering the forbidden vault was traditionally harsh, always public, and served as the greatest single deterrent for ever being inclined to do so. In the past transgressors had been brought before the fully assembled college of priests and monks to have their eyes put out, in order to cleanse them of whatever they may have seen; their tongue torn out with red-hot pincers, so they could not repeat anything they had inadvertently learned; and molten lead poured into their ears, to burn away any forbidden words that had been whispered therein.

The offender's broken body was then expelled from the Citadel as a warning to others of the dangers of disobedience and the pursuit of restricted knowledge. It was from this gruesome ritual that the phrase 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' sprang. There was a fourth, lesser known part of the saying which advised that you should also 'Do no evil unto others', a line which seemed somewhat irreconcilable when held up against the history of its origin.

Like everyone in the Citadel, Athanasius had heard the stories of what happened to those who strayed into the forbidden vault, but to his knowledge no one had been subjected to the punishment for hundreds of years. This was partly because the world had turned and such displays of barbarity were no longer tolerated, but mostly because no one dared enter without the requisite authority. He had been inside it only once before, when he had been appointed chamberlain, and had hoped he would never have cause to visit it again.

As he trudged dutifully through the gloom, his eyes fixed on the gossamer-thin filament embedded in the floor, he began to wonder about the purpose of his summons and whether there had been some terrible new discovery. Perhaps Samuel had somehow managed to gain access to the library between his escape and his doomed climb. Or made his way to the forbidden room and stolen or vandalized one of the sacred and irreplaceable texts ...

Up ahead the thread of floor lights turned sharply right and disappeared behind the unseen upright of a stone wall. It marked the point where the pathway turned into the final corridor leading to the furthest vault. Whatever the reason the Abbot had summoned him, he would discover it soon enough.

## 23

‘The victim shows signs of recent laceration and trauma to hands and feet,’ Reis said as he continued his preliminary examination of the body. ‘The cuts are numerous. Deep. Down to the bone in some cases. Also irregular and torn. There are fragments of what look like rock embedded in some of the wounds. I’m removing them and bagging them for analysis.’

He held his hand over the microphone on the headset and turned to Arkadian.

‘He climbed up there before he jumped, didn’t he?’

Arkadian nodded. ‘There’s no ancient lift in there, far as we know.’

Reis turned back and looked at the ravaged hands and feet of the monk, picturing the monumental height of the Citadel in his mind. ‘Tough climb,’ he said quietly, before releasing his hand from the microphone and continuing.

‘The cuts to the victim’s hands and feet, though recent, show signs of significant blood coagulation, suggesting the injuries were sustained a good few hours ante-mortem. There’s scar tissue forming on some of the smaller cuts, in some cases grafting over the fragments of rock. I’d say, going purely on the extent of healing, that he’d been up there a few days before he jumped.’

He lowered the hand on to the cold ceramic table and examined the exposed arm.

‘The length of rope attached to the victim’s right wrist has also rubbed extensively on the skin, removing the epidermis. The rope is a rough, hemp-like weave, tough, and abrasive.’

‘It’s his belt,’ Arkadian said. Reis looked up and frowned. ‘Look at the cassock, around his waist.’

Reis switched his gaze to the middle of the dark, stained garment and spotted a thick leather loop stitched roughly to the cloth on one side and a tear on the other where its twin should have been. He’d noted other rips in the cassock, two above the hem and two by the wrists, but he’d missed this one.

‘The rope may be the victim’s belt,’ Reis stated for the record. ‘There are some leather loops round the middle of his cloak, though one appears to be missing. Again I will bag everything and send it across the hall for analysis.’

Arkadian reached behind Reis and pressed the flashing red square to pause the recording.

‘In other words,’ he said, ‘our guy climbed up the mountain using his belt as a makeshift rope, cut his hands and feet on the rocks in the process, hung around on the summit long enough for them to start healing, then threw himself off as soon as there was a big enough crowd to ruin my morning. Case closed.’

‘Now, much as I’d love to hang around, I’ve got some less glamorous but nevertheless deserving cases to pursue. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll just borrow that phone over by the coffee pot and try to get on with some real police work.’ He turned and disappeared beyond the harsh white light of the examination table. ‘Just holler if you find any clues.’

‘Oh, I will.’ Reis reached for a pair of heavy-duty shears. ‘You sure you don’t want to watch? I’m about to cut his cloak off. Not every day you get to see a naked monk.’

‘You’re a sick man, Reis.’ Arkadian picked up the phone and wondered which of his six active cases he should catch up on first.

Reis looked down at the corpse and smiled. ‘Sick!’ he muttered to himself. ‘You try doing this every day and staying normal.’

He opened the shears, slipped them over the collar of the monk’s cassock and started to cut.

## 24

Athanasius followed the filament of light in the floor round the corner and into the long dark corridor where the forbidden vault lay waiting. If there was anyone there ahead of him he couldn't see them. The blood-red light in the chamber was not designed to carry far. He hated the darkness, but he hated the fact that you couldn't hear anything even more. He'd heard Thomas explaining it to Samuel once – something to do with a constant low-frequency signal, inaudible to the human ear, which disrupted all sound waves and prevented them from carrying further than the circle of light that surrounded you. It meant you could be ten feet from someone and still have no idea what they were saying. It ensured that all forty-two chambers, even when full of scholars passionately arguing theological points, remained in a permanent state of librarian silence. It also meant that, despite his rapid and purposeful march through the Bible-black corridors, Athanasius could not even draw comfort from the sound of his own footfalls.

He was halfway down the corridor when he saw it. Briefly, at the edge of his light. A white spectral flash in the dark.

Athanasius sprang backwards, scanning the blackness. Trying to glimpse again what he thought he had seen. Something smacked into his back and he whirled around. Saw the stone upright of a bookcase. Whipped his head back to try and penetrate the ominous darkness.

He saw it again.

At first, just the faintest of outlines, like a web drifting in the dark. Then, as the thing advanced, it began to solidify into the gaunt and shuffling shape of a man. His body was thin and bony, barely looking strong enough to support the cassock that hung around him like partially discarded skin, and his long, sparse hair hung down in front of sightless eyes. Despite the ghastly appearance of the slowly advancing monk Athanasius felt his whole body relax.

'Brother Ponti,' he breathed. 'You gave me quite a start.'

It was the caretaker, an old monk specifically chosen for the task of cleaning and maintaining the great library because his blindness meant he needed no illumination to work by. He twitched his head in the direction of the voice, staring straight through Athanasius with his milky gaze. 'I'm sorry,' he rasped, his voice parched by the arid air. 'I do try and keep to the walls so as not to bump into folk, but this section's a bit on the narrow side, Brother ...?'

'Athanasius.'

'Ah yes,' Ponti nodded. 'Athanasius. I remember you. You've been in there before, haven't you?' He waved in the direction of the vault.

'Once,' Athanasius replied.

'That's right.' Brother Ponti nodded slowly, as if agreeing with himself. 'Well,' he said, turning stiffly towards the exit, 'don't let me keep you. You'll find it's already occupied. And if I were you, Brother, I wouldn't keep him waiting.'

Then he turned once more and melted into the blackness.

## 25

It took Reis several minutes to slice through the saturated material of the monk's cassock. He cut from collar to hem, then down each arm, careful not to disturb the body beneath. Rolling the corpse slightly, he then removed the garment and placed it in a steel tray ready for separate analysis.

The guy was in pretty good shape.

At least he would have been before he fell a thousand feet on to solid rock.

Reis tapped the red square on the computer screen with his knuckle and restarted the recording.

'First impressions of the subject's body match what one would expect to see following a fall from a great height: massive trauma to the torso, shards of fractured rib jutting out through several places on both sides of the thorax, totally in keeping with the types of compression fracture caused by the extraordinary deceleration of a body in freefall coming into contact with the ground.

'The body is covered in thick, dark, coagulated blood from numerous puncture wounds. Both clavicles are fractured in several places, and the right one protrudes through the skin at the base of the neck. There also appears to be ...'

He looked more closely.

'... some kind of historical, uniform incision running horizontally across the neck from shoulder to shoulder.'

He took hold of the retractable hose arching over the examination table and squeezed the handle, directing a jet of water on to the neck and chest of the corpse. The sticky, dark film began to wash away.

'Jesus Christ,' Reis muttered.

He moved the spray across the rest of the body: first the chest, then the arms, then the legs. He paused the recording once more.

'Hey, Arkadian,' he called over his shoulder, still transfixed by the livid body on the slab. 'You said you wanted a clue. How does this grab you?'

## 26

Athanasius stopped at the door, aware that he did not possess the right to enter the restricted room, and more than slightly fearful of what might happen if he did.

He looked inside.

The Abbot stood imposingly in the confined space, the red light seeming to radiate from him as if he were a demon glowing in the darkness. His back was to the door, so he could not see Athanasius. His eyes were fixed on a grid of fifteen apertures carved into the far wall, each containing a receptacle made from the same material as aircraft black box data recorders. Athanasius recalled Father Malachi telling him how they were strong enough to protect their precious contents even if the whole mountain fell upon them; that did little to comfort him now.

He glanced down at the invisible line on the floor and contemplated stepping boldly into the room, but the phrase ‘See no evil, hear no evil’ rose unbidden into his thoughts and he remained where he stood until the Abbot, either sensing his presence or wondering at the lack of it, turned and looked straight at him. Athanasius noted with relief that his master’s face, despite its unsettling crimson pall, did not display the glower of a man on the warpath but the thoughtfulness of one with a problem to solve.

‘Come in.’ The Abbot removed one of the boxes from its recess and carried it to the lectern in the centre of the room. Sensing Athanasius’s continued reluctance to step inside, he said, ‘I spoke to Malachi on my way through. You may enter the vault – for an hour at least.’

As Athanasius obeyed, a second red glow accompanied him across the vault, confirming that – for the time being – his presence was legitimate.

The lectern stood in the centre of the room, facing the entrance but with the reading surface angled away from it. Anyone standing at it would be warned of an approach by the tell-tale sign of the advancing light, and any book placed there could not be seen from outside.

‘I summoned you here,’ the Abbot said, ‘because I wish to show you something.’

He unlatched the box and gently opened it.

‘Do you have any idea what this might be?’

Athanasius leaned forward, his aura joining the Abbot’s to illuminate a book, bound with a single panel of slate with a bold symbol etched on to its surface – the symbol of the Tau.

His breath caught in his throat. He knew at once what it was, as much from descriptions he had read as the circumstances in which he was now discovering it.

‘A Heretic Bible,’ Athanasius said.

‘No,’ the Abbot corrected. ‘Not *a* Heretic Bible. *The* Heretic Bible. This is the last remaining copy.’

Athanasius gazed down upon the slate cover. ‘I thought they had all been destroyed.’

‘That is what we wish people to believe. What better way to prevent them from searching for something than to persuade them that it does not exist?’

Athanasius considered the wisdom of this. He had barely spared a thought for the legendary book in years, because he thought it was exactly that – a legend. Yet here it was, close enough to touch.

‘That book,’ the Abbot said through clenched teeth, ‘contains thirteen pages of outrageous, poisonous and twisted lies; lies which dare to contradict and pervert the very word of God as recorded and set down in our own true Bible.’

Athanasius stared down at the innocuous-looking cover. ‘Then why spare this copy?’ he asked. ‘If it’s so dangerous, why keep even one?’

‘Because,’ the Abbot replied, jabbing his finger at the box, ‘you can destroy books, but their contents have a way of surviving; and in order for us to confound and defeat our enemies it helps if we first know their minds. Let me show you something.’

He placed a finger on the edge of the cover and opened it. The pages inside were also made of slate, held by three leather thongs. As the Abbot turned them, Athanasius felt an overwhelming temptation to read what was scratched on their surfaces. Unfortunately the rate at which the Abbot was proceeding, coupled with the nebulizing quality of the red light, made it virtually impossible. He could see that each page contained two columns of dense script, but it was several moments before he realized they were written in Malan, the language of the first heretics. With his brain now attuned he managed to pick up just two fragments as the pages flipped over. Two fragments, two phrases – both of which added to his already considerable state of shock.

‘There,’ the Abbot announced as he reached the final page. ‘This is part of what equates to their version of Genesis. You are familiar with their bastard tongue, I believe.’

Athanasius hesitated, his mind still trembling with the forbidden words he had just read.

‘Yes,’ he managed to say without his voice betraying him. ‘I have ... studied it.’

‘Then read,’ the Abbot said.

Unlike the previous pages, the final tablet of slate contained only eight lines of text. They were arranged as a Calligram forming the sign of the Tau – the same textual symbol Kathryn Mann had gazed upon two hours previously. This one, however, was complete.

*The one true cross will appear on earth  
All will see it in a single moment – all will wonder  
The cross will fall  
The cross will rise  
To unlock the Sacrament  
And bring forth a new age  
Through its merciful death*

Athanasius looked up at the Abbot, his mind racing.

‘This is why I brought you here,’ the Abbot said. ‘I wanted you to see with your own eyes how Brother Samuel’s death may be interpreted by our enemies.’

Athanasius studied the prophecy again. The first three lines read like a description of the extraordinary events of the morning; it was the last four that made the blood drain from his cheeks. What they suggested was something incredible, unbelievable, momentous.

‘This is why we kept the book,’ the Abbot said solemnly. ‘Knowledge is power; and knowing what our enemies believe gives us the advantage. I want you to keep a close and watchful eye on Brother Samuel’s body. For if these twisted words contain any truth, and he is the cross mentioned here, then he may yet rise up – and be seen by our enemies as a weapon to use against us.’

## 27

Reis and Arkadian stared down at the body. Criss-crossing the skin was a complex and elaborate network of livid white scars; some old, some more recent – all deliberate. In the macabre setting of the autopsy room they gave the impression that the monk was some kind of gothic monster, stitched together from the component parts of a number of men.

Reis restarted the recording.

‘The subject shows significant and uniform scarring over much of his body, the result of cuts made repeatedly by a sharp, clinical instrument such as a scalpel or a razor, possibly during some kind of ritual.’

He began the grisly inventory.

‘Starting at the head ... An old, healed scar entirely circumscribing the neck where it connects with the torso. Similar scars circumscribe both arms at the shoulder and both legs at the groin. The one at the top of the upper left arm has been recently re-opened, but already shows signs of healing. This incision is also straight-edged and extremely neat, surgically precise even, from a highly sharpened blade.

‘Also on the left arm at the junction of the upper bicep and tricep is a T-shaped keloid scar, thicker than the others, caused by repeated heat trauma.’ He glanced across at Arkadian. ‘Looks like this boy’s been on the receiving end of a cattle brand.’

Arkadian stared at the raised ‘T’ on the monk’s upper arm, all thought of his other cases now forgotten. He picked up Reis’s camera. Its LCD screen displayed a miniature version of the monk lying on the autopsy table. With a press of a button it was transmitted wirelessly to the case file.

‘There’s another scar running along the top of the ribcage, and one bisecting it, down through the sternum to the navel.’ Reis paused. ‘In shape and size it resembles the Y-cut we make to remove major organs during a post-mortem.

‘Radiating from the areola of the left nipple are four straight lines arranged at right angles to form the shape of a cross. Also not recent, each is approximately ...’ Reis produced his tape again ‘... twenty centimetres long.’ He took a closer look. ‘There’s another cross on the right side of the torso, level with the base of the ribcage; different from the rest; roughly thirteen centimetres laterally, like a Christian cross lying on its side; evidence of stretch marks on the skin surrounding it; must have happened a long time ago. It also hasn’t been subjected to ritualistic re-opening, so maybe it isn’t as significant as the others.’

Arkadian took another snap then examined the scar close up. It did look exactly like a fallen cross. He pulled back, searching for meaning in the pattern of incisions. ‘Have you seen anything like this before?’

Reis shook his head. ‘My guess is some kind of initiation thing. But most of these scars aren’t fresh, so I don’t know how relevant they are to his jumping.’

‘He didn’t just jump,’ Arkadian said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘With most suicides, death is the principal objective. But not with this guy; his death was somehow ... secondary. I think his primary motive lay elsewhere.’

Reis’s eyebrows disappeared beneath his hair. ‘If you throw yourself off the top of the Citadel, death has got to be *fairly* high on your agenda.’

‘But why climb all the way to the top? A fall from almost any height would have been enough.’

‘Maybe he was scared of winding up crippled. Lots of half-hearted suicide bids end up in the hospital rather than in here.’

‘Even so, he didn’t need to struggle to the very top. He also didn’t need to wait. But he did. He sat there, for God knows how long, in the freezing cold, bleeding from multiple wounds, waiting for morning. Why did he do that?’

‘Maybe he was resting. A climb like that is going to wipe anyone out; he would have been losing blood all the way up. So maybe he got to the top, collapsed from exhaustion, and the sun eventually revived him. Then he did it.’

Arkadian frowned. ‘But that’s not how it happened. He didn’t just wake up and topple off the mountain. He stood there with his arms outstretched for at least a couple of hours.’ He mimicked the pose. ‘Why would he do that if he just wanted to end it all? I’m pretty sure the public nature of his death is significant. The only reason we’re standing here having this conversation is because he waited until there was an audience. If he’d pulled this little stunt in the middle of the night I doubt whether it would even have made the news. He knew exactly what he was doing.’

‘OK,’ Reis conceded. ‘So maybe the guy didn’t get enough attention when he was a kid. What difference does it make? He’s still dead.’

Arkadian considered the question.

*What difference did it make?*

He knew his boss wanted the whole thing dealt with quickly and painlessly. The politic move would be to ignore the natural curiosity he’d been born with and stop asking difficult questions. Then again, he could just turn in his badge and sell holiday apartments or become a tour guide.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I didn’t ask to be put on this case. Your job is to establish how someone died. Mine is to work out why, and in order to do that it’s important to try and understand this guy’s mindset. Jumpers are usually victims – people who can’t cope any more, people who take the path of least resistance to death. But this guy had courage. He wasn’t a classic victim, and he damn sure didn’t take the path of least resistance. Which makes me think his actions meant something to him. Maybe they meant something to someone else too.’

## 28

Athanasius hurried up the corridor after the Abbot, their personal haloes brightening with every step they took.

‘So tell me,’ the Abbot said, without breaking stride, ‘who has made contact from the investigation?’

‘An Inspector Arkadian has been assigned to the case,’ Athanasius replied breathlessly. ‘He has already requested an interview with someone who might have information on the deceased. I told our brothers on the outside to say that the death was a tragedy and we would do everything we could to assist.’

‘Did you say whether he was known to us?’

‘I said there were many people living and working inside the Citadel and we would endeavour to discover if any of them were missing. I wasn’t sure whether or not we wanted to claim him as ours at this point, or whether you would prefer us to remain distant.’

The Abbot nodded. ‘You did well. Inform the public office to maintain the same courteous degree of cooperation, for now. It may be that the question of Brother Samuel’s body will resolve itself without our interference. Once the authorities have completed the post-mortem and no family members come forward to claim the body, we can step forward and offer to take it as a gesture of compassion. It will show to the world what a loving and caring church we are, one prepared to embrace a poor, wretched soul who sought to end his life in such a lonely and tragic way. It will also bring Brother Samuel back to us without our having to admit kinship.’

The Abbot stopped and turned, fixing Athanasius with his sharp, grey eyes.

‘However, in the light of what you have just read we must also be vigilant. We must leave nothing to chance. If anything unusual is reported, anything at all, then we must be ready to get Brother Samuel’s body back immediately, and by any means necessary.’ He stared at Athanasius from beneath his beetled brows. ‘That way, if some miracle does come to pass and he rises again, he will at least be in our custody. Whatever happens, we cannot let our enemies take possession of his body.’

‘As you wish,’ Athanasius replied. ‘But surely if what you have just shown me is the only remaining copy of the book, who else would know of the ...’ he hesitated, not quite sure how to describe the ancient words scratched on the sheet of slate. He didn’t want to use the word ‘prophecy’ because that would imply that the words were the will of God, which in itself would be heresy. ‘Who else could know the specifics of the ... prediction ...?’

The Abbot nodded approvingly, picking up on his chamberlain’s caution. It confirmed to him that Athanasius was the right man to handle the official side of the situation; he had the political sophistication and the discretion for it. The unofficial side he would handle himself. ‘We cannot simply trust that the destruction of all the books and the people who carried them has also destroyed the words and thoughts they contained,’ he explained. ‘Lies are like weeds. You can grub them up, poison the root, burn them away to nothing – but they always find a way to return. So we must assume that this “prediction”, as you wisely refer to it, will be known in some form to our enemies, and that they will be preparing to act upon it. But do not worry, Brother,’ he said, laying a hand heavy as a bear’s paw on Athanasius’s shoulder. ‘We have withstood far more than this in our long and colourful history. We must simply do now as we have always done: stay one step ahead, pull up the drawbridge and wait for the outside threat to withdraw.’

‘And if it does not?’ Athanasius asked.

The hand tightened on his shoulder. ‘Then we attack it with everything we have.’

## 29

Reis reached across the monk's body to a point at the top of the sternum, pressed down firmly with a long-handled scalpel and drew the blade smoothly down through the flesh, clear to the pubic bone, carefully following the line of the existing scar. He completed the Y-incision by making two more deep cuts from the top of the one he had just made to the outer edge of each of the monk's shattered collarbones. Finally he cut away the skin and muscle from the monk's chest and folded it open, revealing the ruined ribs beneath. At this point he would usually need surgical shears or the Stryker saw to cut through the cage of bone that protected the heart, lungs and other internal organs, but the massive impact of the landing had done most of the work for him. With just a few ligament cuts he managed to gain access to the chest cavity.

'Tap the square for me, would you,' Reis said, nodding towards the monitor. 'Got my hands full here.'

Arkadian looked at the bloody section of ribs Reis was clutching and restarted the recording.

'OK,' Reis said, the jaunty tone back in his voice, 'first impressions of the internal organs are that they are surprisingly well preserved, considering the impact. The ribs clearly did their job, even if they were all but destroyed in the process.'

He laid the ribcage down in a stainless-steel tray then made some well-practised cuts inside the body cavity to detach the larynx, oesophagus and ligaments connecting the major organs to the spinal cord before lifting the entire block out in one piece and transferring them to a wide metal container.

'The liver shows some evidence of haemorrhaging,' he said, 'but none of the major organs are particularly pale so he didn't bleed out. The subject probably died of systemic organ failure following massive trauma, which I'll confirm once I've run the tox and tissue tests.'

He carried the container to an examination bench by the wall and started taking routine measurements of the liver, heart and lungs, as well as tissue samples from each.

Arkadian looked up at the TV in the corner and was once again confronted by the eerie sight of the man now lying in pieces in front of him standing proud and very much alive on the summit of the Citadel. It was the footage all the networks were now using. It showed the monk shuffling towards the edge. Glancing down. Tipping forward, then suddenly dropping from view. The camera jerked downwards and zoomed wide as it tried to follow the fall. It tightened back in, losing focus as it found him again and struggled to keep him in frame. It was like watching the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, or the footage of the planes hitting the Twin Towers. There was something momentous about it, and deeply terrible. He couldn't take his eyes off it. At the last moment the camera lost him again and pulled wide just in time to reveal the base of the mountain and the crowds of people on the embankment recoiling in shock from where the body had hit the ground.

Arkadian dropped his gaze to the floor. He replayed the sequence in his head over and over, piecing together the glimpsed fragments of the monk's fall ...

'It was deliberate,' he whispered.

Reis looked up from the digital scales currently displaying the weight of the dead monk's liver. 'Of course it was deliberate.'

'No, I mean the *way* he fell. Suicide jumps are usually pretty straightforward. Jumpers either flip over backwards, or launch themselves forward and tip over head first.'

'The head's the heaviest part of the body,' Reis said. 'Gravity always pulls it straight down – given a long enough fall.'

'And a fall from the top of the Citadel should be plenty long enough. It's over a thousand feet high. But our guy stayed flat – all the way down.'

'So?'

'So it was a controlled fall.'

Arkadian went to the stainless-steel tray holding the cassock. He grabbed a set of tongs and peeled open the stiff material until he found one of the sleeves. 'Look. Those rips you found at the wrists? They were for his hands. It meant he could pull his robe tight against his body – like a kind of wing.' He dropped the sleeve and sorted through the grisly folds until he found the other cuts a few inches above the hem. 'And these were for his feet.' He dropped the material back down and turned to Reis. 'That's why he didn't fall head-first. He didn't jump off the mountain – he flew off it.'

Reis looked across at the broken body under the examination lights. 'Then I'd say he really needs to work on his landings.'

Arkadian ignored him, following this new thought. 'Maybe he thought he could reduce the speed of the fall enough to survive it. Or maybe ...'

He pictured the monk again, his arms stretched out, his body tilted down, his head held steady, as if focusing on something, as if he was ...

'Aiming.'

'What?'

'I think he was aiming for a specific spot.'

'Why on earth would he do that?'

It was a good question. Why aim somewhere if you were going to die wherever you landed? But then, death wasn't his primary concern, it wasn't nearly as important as ... witnesses. 'He was aiming because he wanted to land in our jurisdiction!'

Reis's brow furrowed.

'The Citadel is a state within a state,' Arkadian explained. 'Anything that side of the moat wall belongs to them; anything this side is our responsibility. He wanted to make sure he ended up on our side of the wall. He wanted all this to happen. He wanted public investigation. He wanted us to see all these cuts on his body.'

'But why?'

'I have absolutely no idea. But whatever it is, he thought it was worth dying for. His dying wish, literally, was to get away from that place.'

'So what are you going to do when some big religious cheese comes calling, asking for his monk back? Give them a lecture on jurisdiction?'

Arkadian shrugged. 'So far they haven't even admitted he's one of theirs.'

He glanced over at the gaping body of the monk, the body cavity now empty, the surgically precise scars round his neck, legs and arms still visible. Maybe the scars were some kind of message, and whoever came forward to claim the body would know what they meant.

Reis picked up a cardboard container from underneath the examination table, restarted the recording, and began squeezing the contents of the monk's stomach into it. 'OK,' he said. 'The major intestine contains very little, so our friend's last supper wasn't exactly a banquet. Looks like the last thing he ate was an apple and maybe some bread a while before that, which I'll label and send for analysis. The stomach contents appear to be largely undigested, suggesting that his digestive system had wholly or partially shut down, indicating a high degree of ante-mortem stress. Wait a minute,' he said, as something shifted inside the slippery membranes between his fingers. 'There's something else here.'

Arkadian stepped over to the table as something small and dark dropped into the soup of apple pulp and gastric juices. It looked like a curled-up strip of overcooked beef. 'What on earth is that?'

Reis picked it up and moved across to the sink, knocking the long arm of the tap with his elbow and holding the object under the stream of water.

'It appears to be a small strip of leather,' he said, laying it down on a tray lined with a paper towel. 'It was rolled up, maybe to make it easier to swallow.' He took a set of tweezers and started opening it out.

'He was missing a belt loop from his cassock, wasn't he?' Arkadian whispered.

Reis nodded.

'I think we just found it.'

Reis moved it alongside a centimetre scale etched into the surface of the tray. Arkadian sent another picture to the case file. Reis flipped it over so he could photograph the other side and all the air seemed to be sucked from the room.

Neither of them moved.

Neither of them said anything.

Arkadian raised the camera.

The click of the shutter snapped Reis out of his trance.

He cleared his throat.

'Having unrolled and cleaned the leather object, something appears to be scratched on its surface.'

He glanced up at Arkadian before continuing.

'Twelve numbers, seemingly random.'

Arkadian stared down at them, his mind already racing. The combination for a lock? Some kind of code? Maybe they referred to a chapter and verse from the Bible and would spell out a word or a sentence that might shed light on things, possibly even the identity of the Sacrament. He checked the numbers again. 'They're not random,' he said, reading the sequence from left to right. 'Not random at all.'

He looked up at Reis.

'That's a telephone number,' he said.

## II

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

*Genesis 3:16*

## 30

The primal screams echoed round the bright room with a desperate, animal quality that seemed out of place in the sleek modern setting of the New Jersey hospital.

Liv stood in the corner, watching Bonnie's face contort in pain. Her phone had woken her a little after two in the morning, dragging her out of bed, into her car, and south on I-95 with all the empty trucks making their way out of New York City. It had been Myron; Bonnie's waters had broken.

Another lung-deep scream tore through the room and she looked across at Bonnie squatting naked in the centre of the room, howling so hard that her face had gone purple and the cords in her neck stood out like high-tension cables. Myron held on, supporting one arm, while the midwife held the other. The howl ebbed slightly, making way for the incongruous sound of waves lapping against a beach. They flowed gently from a portable boom box in the corner.

In Liv's nicotine-starved mind the supposedly soothing sounds of the seashore morphed into the tormenting crackle of cellophane being ripped off a fresh pack of Luckies. She craved a cigarette more than she had ever desired anything in her life. Hospitals always had that effect on her. The very fact you were expressly forbidden to do something made it almost irresistible to her. She was the same in churches.

Bonnie's scream rose again, this time something between a moan and a growl. Myron stroked her back and made shushing noises like he was trying to calm a child who had woken from a terrible nightmare. Bonnie turned to him and in a low voice made raw from screaming panted a single word: 'Arnica.'

Liv reached gratefully for her notebook to log the request and the time it was made. Arnica was also known as wolf's bane or mountain tobacco and had been used since the dawn of time as a herbal remedy. Liv often used it herself to reduce bruising; it was also thought to alleviate the trauma of a long drawn out and painful childbirth. She found herself sincerely hoping this would prove to be true as she watched Myron fumbling with a small vial containing the tiny white sugar pills. The screaming started again and rose in pitch as another contraction arrived.

*For God's sake, take the Pethedine,* Liv thought.

An advocate of the healing properties of plants she may have been; a masochist she most definitely was not. Bonnie's screaming soared to a new zenith and her hand shot out to grab Myron, knocking the entire contents of the blue box on to the shiny vinyl floor.

Liv's cell phone rang in her pocket.

She felt for the 'off' button through the thick cotton of her cargo pants and pressed hard, hoping to catch it before it rang again. No one gave the slightest indication they even remembered she was there. She fished the phone out and glanced down at the scratched grey screen, made sure it was definitely off, then returned her attention, just in time, to the unfolding story in the room.

Bonnie's eyes rolled back in her head and her heavily pregnant form crumpled to the floor, despite the best efforts of Myron and the midwife to keep her upright. Instinctively, Liv dived for the emergency cord dangling by her side and pulled as hard as she could.

Within seconds the room filled with orderlies fluttering around Bonnie like moths, crunching homeopathic pills underfoot. A trolley appeared from nowhere and she was wheeled from the room, away from Liv and the gentle music of the shoreline, down the hallway to another room full of the latest drugs and clinical equipment.

## 31

Ruin Homicide shared office space with the Robbery Division on the fourth floor of a new glass block built behind the carved stone façade of the original police building. The office was open-plan and noisy. Men in shirtsleeves perched on the edge of desks and tipped back in chairs as they talked loudly into phones or with each other.

Arkadian sat at his desk with his hand clamped to his ear, trying to listen to the answer-phone message on the number he'd just called. A woman's voice. American. Confident sounding. Direct. Late twenties or early thirties. He hung up rather than leaving a message. You never got any information by leaving messages. Best just to keep on trying until whoever you were calling got curious and picked up.

He dropped the handset into its cradle and tapped the space-bar on his keyboard to banish the screensaver. The photos from the examination table appeared. With his eyes he traced the neat scars snaking across the dead monk's body, strange lines and crosses that ultimately formed one giant question mark.

Since the post-mortem, the mystery of the monk's identity had deepened. The Citadel still hadn't claimed him as one of their own, and all the regular methods of victim identification had so far drawn a blank. His fingerprints had come back unknown. Ditto his dental records. His DNA swabs were still working their way through the labs, but unless the dead man had been arrested for a sex crime, a homicide or some kind of terrorist activity it was unlikely he was going to show up on any of those databases either. And Arkadian's boss was starting to lean on him for some kind of progress report; he wanted to draw a line under this thing. So did Arkadian, but he wasn't going to whitewash it. The monk belonged to someone. It was his job to find out whom.

He glanced at the clock on the far wall. It was now a little after one in the afternoon. His wife would just be getting in from the school where she helped out three days a week. He dialled his own number and clicked on the lower left corner of his computer screen to open up a browser window while he listened to it connecting.

His wife picked up on the third ring. She sounded breathless.

'It's me,' Arkadian said, tapping '*Religion*' and '*Scars*' into the search box and hitting return.

'Heeeey,' she said, drawing out the middle of the word in a way that still got him twelve years after he'd first heard it. 'You coming home?'

Arkadian frowned as the results came back, all four hundred and thirty-one thousand of them.

'Not yet,' he said, scrolling through the first page.

'Then what are you calling for, getting a girl's hopes up?'

'Just wanted to hear your voice. How was work?'

'Tiring. You try teaching English to a roomful of nine-year-olds. I must've read *The Hungry Caterpillar* at least a couple of hundred times. Though by the end, there was one kid I swear could read it better than me.'

He could tell from her voice she was smiling. She was always happiest when she'd spent the morning in a room full of kids. The realization also made him feel sad.

'Sounds like a know-all,' he said. 'You should get *him* to read it to the class next time, see how he copes under pressure.'

'It's a girl, actually. Girls are cleverer than boys.'

Arkadian smiled. 'Yes, but you end up marrying us. So you can't be all that bright.'

'But then we divorce you and take all your money.'

'I don't have any money.'

'Oh well ... then I guess you're pretty safe.'

He clicked on a link and scrolled through pictures of tribesmen with raw wounds slashed red into ebony flesh. None of them matched the scars on the monk.

‘So what case are you working?’ she asked. ‘Anything gruesome?’

‘The monk.’

‘You find out who he is yet, or can’t you say?’

‘I can’t say because I don’t know.’ He clicked back to the results page and opened a link dealing with stigmata, the unexplained phenomenon of wounds similar to those Christ suffered during his crucifixion appearing on ordinary people.

‘So you going to be late?’

‘Too early to tell. They want to get this one squared away.’

‘Which means “yes”.’

‘Which means “probably”.’

‘Well ... just be careful.’

‘I’m sitting at my desk doing Google searches.’

‘Then come home.’

‘I always do.’

‘Love you.’

‘You too,’ he whispered.

He looked up at the office, humming with noise and attitude. Most of the people currently occupying it were either divorced or well on their way, but he knew that would never happen to him. He was married to his wife, not the job; and even though that choice had meant he’d never been given the sexy, high-profile cases from which careers and reputations were made, he didn’t mind. He wouldn’t swap his life with any of them. Besides, there was something about this suicide that made him feel he might just have caught a live one. He clicked randomly on one of the stigmata websites and started to read.

The site was pretty academic and consisted of dense, dry text only occasionally punctuated by a juicy photo of a bleeding hand or foot, though none of them matched the scars he’d found on the monk.

He removed his glasses and rubbed at the indentations they left on the side of his nose when he wore them too long, which was every day of his working life. He knew he should be getting on with his other cases while he waited for word to come down from the Citadel, or until the American woman answered her phone, but the case was already getting under his skin: the apparent public martyrdom, the ritualized scars, the fact that the monk didn’t appear to officially exist.

He closed the search window and spent the next twenty minutes typing the few facts he had gathered and his initial thoughts and observations into the case file. When he had finished he reread his notes, then jogged back through the post-mortem photos until he found the one he was looking for.

He looked again at the thin strip of leather laid out on the evidence tray, the harsh light of the camera flash picking out the twelve numbers scratched crudely on its surface. He copied them into his mobile phone then closed the file, grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and headed for the door. He needed some air and something to eat. He always thought better when he was on the move.

Two floors down, in an office stacked high with old file boxes, a pale hand dusted with freckles tapped a hacked security code into a computer belonging to an admin clerk working a switch shift who wasn’t due in for another couple of hours.

After a brief pause the monitor flashed into life, bathing the dark office in its cold light. An arrow slid across the screen, found the server icon, and clicked it open. A finger stroked the wheel on the mouse, jogging down through the file directory until its possessor found what he was looking for. He reached under the desk and plugged a flash memory stick into the front of the processor tower. A new icon appeared on the desktop. He dragged the monk’s case file to the icon and watched the contents copy on to it – the post-mortem report, the photos, the audio commentary, Arkadian’s notes.

Everything.

## 32

Liv Adamsen leaned against the rough trunk of the single cypress that sprang from the lawn by the hospital. She tilted her head back and blew long, relieved streams of cigarette smoke towards the overhanging branches. Through the canopy she could see a large illuminated cross fixed to the top of the building, like a twisted moon in the slowly brightening sky. As a defective tube blinked fitfully inside it, something glistened on the bark a few feet above her head. She reached up and touched it tentatively. Her hand came away sticky and smelling of the forest. Sap; quite a lot of it – far too much to be healthy.

She stood on tiptoe to examine the source of the flow. She made out a series of indentations and cracks in the bark. It looked like seiridium canker, a common disease in this type of tree, no doubt brought on by the long, dry, icy winter. She'd noticed the same thing on the leylandii in Bonnie and Myron's garden. The increasingly warm summers were drying out the ground and weakening root systems. Sharp, cold periods were allowing these cankers and other forms of rot to take lethal hold on even the strongest of trees. You could cut out canker if you got it early enough, but by the looks of it this tree was already too far gone.

Liv laid her hand gently on the trunk and inhaled deeply on her cigarette. The smell of the sap on her fingers mingled with the smoke. In her mind she saw the cypress burning where it stood, branches twisting and blackening, hungry flames licking at the red sap as it boiled and hissed. She looked at the silent car park, checking she was still alone, spooked by what her imagination had just conjured up. She put it down to her own fragile emotional state, coupled with the exhaustion of witnessing a 'natural' labour that had ended with white-coated men whisking Bonnie to a waiting ventouse. At least both babies, a boy and a girl, were healthy and well. It wasn't quite the story Liv had set out to write, but she guessed it would do. It certainly had plenty of drama. She remembered the moment when she had pulled the emergency cord.

Then she remembered the call.

She'd had the cell for years. It was so old she could barely send a text, let alone take a picture or surf the net with it. Not many people even knew she had it. Fewer still possessed its ex-directory number. She ran through the very short list of those who did while she waited for it to get up to speed.

Liv had adopted what she called her 'home and away' system shortly after starting work on the crime desk. The very first story she'd covered had required her to chase down and interview a particularly slippery attorney representing an even more slippery local property developer being sued by the State on several counts of bribery to obtain building licences. She'd left a number for the lawyer to get back to her. Unfortunately the man who'd called her back was his client. She'd been halfway up a cherry tree with a pruning saw in her hand when she'd taken the call. The force of the abuse he'd hurled at her had almost made her fall out of it, but she'd walked into the kitchen, grabbed a pen and paper and jotted down everything he said, word for word. The entire incident, and the direct quotes arising from it, became the cornerstone of the damning article she subsequently wrote.

She learned two valuable lessons from the incident. The first was never to be afraid to put herself in the story, if that was the best way to tell it; the second was to be more selective about who she handed out her number to. She bought herself a new cell and began to use it exclusively for work. Her old one, with a new SIM card and number, had subsequently been reserved exclusively for friends and family. It now shuddered in her hand as it ended its start-up sequence. She peered down at the screen. She'd missed only one call. There were no waiting messages.

She pressed the menu button and scrolled through to the missed-call log. Whoever had called her had done so from a withheld number. Liv frowned. As far as she could remember, everyone who had this number was also in her address book, so should automatically be recognized. She took a final

drag on her cigarette, ground it into the damp pine needles and headed back towards the hospital to say goodbye to the human part of her human interest story.

## 33

The church that filled one side of the great square in the old town was always busiest in the afternoon. It seemed to scoop up the crowds who had spent the morning wandering around the narrow cobbled streets, staring up at the Citadel. The weary visitor would enter the cool, monolithic interior and be immediately confronted with the answer to their unspoken prayers: row upon row of polished oak pews offering, for no charge, a welcome place to sit and contemplate life, the universe and how unwise their choice of footwear may have been. It was a fully working church, holding services once a day and twice on Sunday, offering communion for those who wanted it and confession for those who needed it.

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