

**ST.  
PETER'S  
BONES**



*Also by Kenneth R. Timmerman*

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HONOR KILLING

THE WREN HUNT

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**ST.  
PETER'S  
BONES**

**KENNETH R.  
TIMMERMAN**

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The scenes recorded in *St. Peter's Bone's* are fictional and a work of the imagination. Any resemblance between the characters in this book and real persons would be, to quote a famous passage from the 9/11 Commission report, "a remarkable coincidence."

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*For the brave Iraqi Christian interpreters who risked their lives to help their American liberators, and for the families of the martyrs.*

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

I Peter 4:12





# Prologue

**Anno Domini 582, somewhere near  
Damascus, Syria**

*Surely you were guiding my steps when you brought me to the tent of Abu Talib, that rascal, and compelled me beyond my better judgment to book passage with that filthy Bedouin and his caravan of sixty lame camels for the treacherous desert journey to Mecca. For it was here, at night, during our first halt, that you brought the boy to me.*

*The young fellow could not have been much older than 12. And yet, despite his very young age, his frail features, his coat of many*

*colors that seemed to be made of so many discarded rags, he attracted quite a crowd around the fire that night when we made our first halt. With eyes like a falcon, and long slender hands that clearly had never known a day's labor, he seemed to combine the harshness of the desert with the soft luxuries of a courtesan. He entranced us with his tales of Hubul, the moon goddess of the Black Stone, who speaks to him in his dreams, whispering of the three daughters she begat in secret congress with the Sun. He entranced us with his tales of imaginary battles with vast armies upon a rocky plain, of a bearded Knight worshipped by all as he wielded a great Sword of Justice, killing the treacherous Jews.*

*Abu Talib smiled as his young nephew spoke of these things. But as I listened to him recount his fantasies and dreams, the most extraordinary thought occurred to me: what if one could channel these pagan beliefs, bend them, so to*

*Speak, to your will, O Lord? What if one could use this illiterate boy from the caravans as a messenger of your Holy Spirit, to bring your Word to the desert tribes of Araby who until now have resisted all efforts to bring them to the true faith?*

*But I am plagued with doubts. Is it you guiding me, Lord, to this boy? Or is it another, one who would lead me from the path of righteousness into Pride, Arrogance, and Self-Aggrandizement?*

—*from* The Secret Book of the Order of St. Hormizd



# 1

## *Al Qaim, Iraq*

There was just a sliver of moon as we moved through the date palm grove on the outskirts of al Qaim. Up ahead of us, the window of the crumbling mud-brick house glowed faintly through the blanket someone had hung over it from the inside. We had left our HUMVEEs back on the main road, more than a kilometer away. My heart was pounding as much from fear as from exertion. I felt sure its loud thumping would give us away.

Sgt. Manny Diaz, of City of Commerce, California, led our small team of Special Forces operators as we ran quickly but quietly from tree to tree. Deron was on point. Willy, Frank and Mojo covered our flanks and our rear with me in tow. When we went out on operations like this, they always allowed me to carry weapons for my personal protection, even though I was a civilian. Anybody looking at us would have thought I was just another member of the team, until I opened my mouth. Catching my breath, hidden by the still-warm tree trunk,

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I gripped my Glock 19 in both hands, aiming vaguely at the ground. But truth be told, my hands were trembling.

It was early March. By this time in the war, five years after the U.S. deposed Saddam Hussein, the Americans had finally begun to take Iraq's borders seriously. Al Qaim shared a rocky desert with Syria, and was the preferred insertion point for al Qaeda and their Baathist allies to bring foreign jihadis, money, and material into my country. It was also the site of one of Saddam's nuclear weapons plants. When the UN arms inspectors finally discovered it, they were embarrassed and said nothing, since they had believed it was just a fertilizer plant as Saddam had always claimed. In the distance we could see the ruined tower of the uranium distillery framed against the evening sky. Somebody with a sense of humor had strung white Christmas lights from it in the form of a heart. That was one of the many things that had changed since the fall of Saddam. People actually laughed and made jokes, without always looking over their shoulder.

I am not a violent man by nature. Many of my countrymen, who can take the life of a man as easily as others brush their teeth, would undoubtedly call me a coward. I remember how I dreaded my eighteenth

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birthday, because I was sure to be called up for military service. With Saddam, the next war was always just around the corner. We used to say that the lucky ones were sent out on construction details, building gigantic palaces for the megalomaniac who ran our country. But some of them weren't so lucky; whatever they saw, Saddam didn't want them to tell anyone. We said they were "growing old in secret," to disguise what we all knew had happened. Saddam had them taken out into the desert and shot.

Until recently, we wore balaclavas on operations like this. The American press referred to them as ski masks, but that is not accurate. The face gear the SpecOps guys gave us was thin and made out of a nylon-based fiber so we could operate in the heat. It was nothing like a ski mask, except that it covered the face.

But now, as the United States was seeking a graceful exit from Iraq, we "terps" had been ordered to participate in the interrogations without our balaclavas. This was intended to show that the dangers we faced had somehow decreased, and that the war was winding down. My elder cousin Gewargis resigned when that order was given, even though he'd been working with the Americans from the beginning. Gewargis, who grew up in

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my uncle's tiny electronics shop with a soldering iron and a tiny screwdriver in his hands, taught me how to repair broken radios and TVs almost before I could walk. I can still remember the first time he revealed to me the mystery of the crystal, bending over a mess of circuit boards with his green eyeshade and suddenly making wild music erupt from the pile of scrap. "I love the Americans," he said. "I'd do just about anything to help them, because they are helping us to recapture our country, to give birth to something like normal human decency after thirty-five years of a nightmare. But the nightmare lives on in these Baathist criminals. Don't the Americans understand that we lived in fear for thirty-five years, and that these Baathists own our fear? There's no way I'm going to let them see my face."

Maybe it was because I was that much younger, and had only lived for a handful of years as a teenager and young adult under Saddam that I didn't take Gewargis seriously. We were living in Karada by then, a mixed Baghdad neighborhood where we had moved once the church bombings began, and opportunities were limited. What was he going to do as a Christian in Baghdad if he didn't work for the Americans? Salvage old TVs?

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“Get out, Yohannes. Don’t press your luck,” he said. “Soon the Americans will be gone. Who’s going to protect you then?”

An aching hollowness gripped my stomach as I thought over what I knew about the man we were hoping to arrest tonight. For a moment, as my chest heaved in the gathering darkness, I wondered whether I had made a mistake. Perhaps I should have played it safe and heeded Gewargis’ prudent advice. Perhaps I should have left my job and gone back to take care of my family. It was as if my gut was warning me that something was dreadfully wrong. Could I have escaped all the deaths and the sorrow and the agony by that one small sacrifice?

But it was already too late. We were about to move.



“Go-go-go!!” Sgt. Diaz mouthed to us, pumping his fist as he and Deron ran the last few meters across the open mud to the farmhouse. The instant that we joined them, chests heaving, hugging the dirty plaster that still clung to the crumbling brick walls of the farmhouse, Sgt. Diaz and Deron kicked open

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the door and I saw the muzzle flash and heard the rounds from his M-4 carbine slam into the far wall.

“Everyone down! Get down now! Down on the floor!” he shouted. No one expected me to translate, since the violence of his gesture was easy to comprehend.

We heard another quick burst of gunfire, and then shouts from the men inside. Sgt. Diaz kicked the legs out of the cheap wooden chair on which our target had been sitting, sending him crashing to the cement floor. Two younger men, completely bewildered by the intrusion, tried to stand up from the table, their hands in the air, but Deron motioned to them with his assault rifle to hit the ground as well. A Soviet-era pistol clattered off the table to the ground, and Deron kicked it away toward the door. All of this happened in about two seconds.

We knew our target only as Abu Hassan. We believed he was the leader of a stay-behind network operating in this sector of the border region. Even with the thick beard, I recognized him from the grainy photographs we had been shown in preparation for tonight’s mission. Something about his eyes disquieted me. They were cold, fearless, hard, and narrowing, like the eyes of a snake. I kneeled down to him and hissed into his ear in Arabic: “How many more of you are there?”

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He just grunted, and turned his head painfully against the cold cement so he could look at me with one eye. Deron had pinioned his arms behind his back with a foot and was getting out plastic cuffs to secure him.

"We know there are five other men in your cell," I said. "Where are they?"

He tried to spit at me, but he couldn't get his head high enough into the air and just got himself wet. "They're with your mother. And when they're through with her they're going after your sister, you son of a whore."

Willy and Frank ran out through the kitchen to the muddy courtyard behind the house to look for the other cell members, while Mojo searched the small house. In a few minutes, they gave the all clear.

By this time, Sgt. Diaz had Abu Hassan back in the chair, his hands cuffed behind his back. He was dressed like a peasant in a dirty grey dishdash that swept the floor, a black and white-checked keffiyeh wrapped around his head and a web belt and a holster at his waist. When we burst in, he and the two young Syrians had been looking at a schematic diagram of our firebase, twenty clicks to the southeast. He had circled the point of entry, and made crude marks where crash barriers and sentries were posted. In a suitcase along the wall we found five million Iraqi dinars--the

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equivalent of around \$5,000--and two suicide vests.

That was how the Baathists operated. They gathered the intelligence, the explosives, and provided the cash. Then they recruited young Arabs from outside Iraq to come blow up Americans and called the whole show, "al Qaeda."

I pulled Sgt. Diaz aside and asked him quietly to let me have at the two young men alone. "They don't have a clue what's going on," I said. "They can tell us if there's anyone else here that we've missed."

"Negative, Johnny," Sgt. Diaz said. "We're going for the big fish first. We want the network, not the bit players."

He must have read the panic in my eyes. Even though I had covered my cheeks and forehead with lampblack, Abu Hassan had seen my real face. And while "Johnny" wasn't my real name--at least, not my Christian name--he'd be able to find out soon enough the identity of the Iraqi terp who had collaborated in his arrest from other detainees, once we took him into custody.

"I will make your sister wish she had not been born," he hissed again. "And then I will come for you. With a pitchfork."

He coughed as he said this, making his chair clatter against the floor, until I realized

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that he was not coughing but laughing. It was the type of joke the Baathists found funny. "I'm coming for you, Johnny. You will never be safe. Every night you are going to be thinking of me, wondering if it's me you hear or just the wind. Johnnee... Johnnee."

He whispered my Americanized name with utter contempt, taunting, making sure that I understood he knew it was a nickname and that he would find out my true name soon enough. Even though the early spring night was still cool, I felt the sweat begin to pool at the back of my neck.

"Hey-hey-hey!" Sgt. Diaz said, whirling around, picking up on his trick. He slapped Abu Hassan so hard that he fell over onto the cement floor, chair and all.

"Go out and wait in the HUMVEE," Sgt. Diaz told me. "We'll take Abu Hassan and his friends back home and see how he likes to talk to serious people. Tell him that, Johnny."

We knew from detainee interrogations that Abu Hassan was in charge of bringing suicide bomber recruits into Iraq from across the border in Syria, and that he commanded a whole series of safe houses near Al Qaim and in Syria itself. But at this point, we didn't yet know who he was, even though we had finally arrested him.

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As Sgt. Diaz tightened the cuffs around Abu Hassan's wrists I told him that because he had refused to cooperate with us, we were going to take him to an interrogation center where professionals were waiting to ask him questions. I must not have conveyed Sgt. Diaz's threat convincingly enough, because he just stared at me with dark unblinking reptilian eyes, as if he would murder me on the spot. For a moment, I felt that I couldn't move, mesmerized, frozen. And then he spat again, this time barely missing my boots.



We are Assyrians, among the first Christians evangelized in what the West used to call the pagan world, sons and daughters of giants both living and dead. How many young Assyrian men bear the name Sargon, in honor of our greatest Emperor? His palace now lies in ruins, scattered piles of stones and mounds of dung surrounded by the dirty back alleys of Karamlesh. And yet, here was Nineveh, fabled capital of the eastern world, navel of the universe, birthplace of civilization. Our ancestor Hammurabi penned the first universal code of human rights, granting each individual

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protection from arbitrary injustice, even by the state. How far we have come since then! How many leagues have we traveled backward toward savagery?

My Assyrian nation, I am only beginning to understand how rich your blood flows in my veins. We are not conquerors any longer, or oppressors of captive peoples. Ever since St. Thomas made his first trip to our homeland, nearly two millennia ago, we have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb, our sins redeemed. Here in this land where the Sword rules supreme, Christ's blood made it easier for us to stretch our necks toward victimhood. Hopeful, trusting, believing in the better nature of our adversaries, we were betrayed again and again. Today we are learning to beware our friends.

The night my father lost his leg, the few Americans soldiers remaining in Baghdad all seemed to be staying on base. I do not hold it against them; such were their orders. As they saw it, their mission was not to occupy Iraq, but to liberate it. And they did. But when they freed us from the iron fist of Saddam, they set loose the hordes of minor demons he had held in check for thirty-five years. Free of their chains, like Prometheus after the eagle has plucked out his liver, they thirsted for blood.

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As always, it was Christian blood they sought and tasted first.

In our adopted neighborhood of Dora, car bombs started to go off within months of the liberation. I was 23 years old at the time. We lived just six miles south of Saddam's former palace, now called the Green Zone, across a few bends of the Tigris. My father, Toma Boutros Yohanna, had been a minor functionary in the Ministry of Agriculture, but because he had been forced to join the Baath Party to keep his job under Saddam, the Americans tossed him out after the Liberation. His moustaches were still black then, and he used to stroke them in the evenings, sitting in front of the blackened TV after another day of futile wandering in search of work, slowly sipping the sweetened black coffee my mother would bring him. In a way, the six months or so that he remained unemployed saved our family from the wrath of the Baathists once the insurgency began. Even the jihadis, the *taqfeer*, accepted the fact that the Americans eventually hired him back. If the Christians didn't work, they couldn't pay the jizya, the protection tax decreed by the Muslim prophet. It was only later that they came for Baba and killed him. Like so many others.

It began slowly at first. Myrna and Emad, my aunt and uncle, lived six blocks away from

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us. Emad was my mother's older brother, the one who owned the TV repair shop and who, like Gewargis, could make broken circuit boards and twisted wires sing. One night in March, intruders broke into the house next door to them and murdered the elderly Christian couple who lived there. The man's throat was slit. The woman was found naked and violated. The murderers left a crudely worded letter behind them, vowing to kill all the Christians in Dora if they did not leave. Myrna was trembling when she carried the letter over to our house. Mother just held her, trying to calm her sobbing, patting her back as she gasped for air.

Two months later Miryam Yonan, a young woman I had known in high school, was riddled with bullets by gunmen in a drive-by shooting. Miryam always wore a white scarf around her hair when I passed her on the way to the Protestant girl's school she attended. Later, in high school, she would take off the scarf once she was in class, and we all wondered at her smooth skin, the perfect ears, her green eyes. We said she was like a butterfly that had just emerged from its cocoon. She had been so proud to get a job as a secretary in the Green Zone, working for an American company. When she opened her remaining eye in the ambulance after the

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shooting we all said she was lucky to survive, but I'm not so sure. After the way they tore up her face, no man would think of marrying her.

Then in July, the jihadis entered the home of one of our neighbors on a Saturday evening and murdered their 16-year old son and an eight-year old daughter. The parents had been attending mass at Mar Gewargis and had left them behind, thinking the teenage boy could take care of his younger sister, just as he always did. They cut the genitals off the boy and stuffed them in the girl's mouth after they violated her. Suffering and loss were not enough, in the eyes of the jihadis. They did such things to create shame, to push us beyond our limits so we would leave.

My parents worked in Mar Gewargis—St. George's—in their spare time. My mother, an elementary school teacher, taught catechism. My father worked as a guard during Saturday evening and Sunday morning services. By that time, two years or so after the liberation, the jihadis had learned they could kill more people by staggering the explosions. First, they set off a small bomb in a doorway or underneath a car. Once the police and the medics and a good crowd had gathered, they set off a second, bigger bomb. That's how they achieved such high kill rates. It worked almost every time.

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That's what they were hoping to do when they set off the first bomb at Mar Gewargis church that August. The blast ripped into the alleyway along the side of the church, just as people were entering for Sunday morning mass. There was blood everywhere and screaming as people tried to rush outside to make sure no one they knew had been injured. Baba stood there, desperate, like some kind of Ottoman sentinel, his black moustaches streaked with grey, the dusty cartouche belt slung across a shoulder, trying to hold them back. "Get back in the church! Back in the church!" he shouted as they bumped up against him. He took out the old Iraqi-made pistol they had given him and fired into the air once or twice to get people's attention. He was glancing behind him, toward the street, where he knew death was lurking, frantically trying to herd people out of the way.

He was pushing the last family and their baby through the door into the side chapel off the nave when a black and orange taxi with the second bomb came rushing toward him, filling the narrow alleyway. He dove onto the backs of the couple with their baby, and that is certainly what saved all of their lives. The white hot wind from the explosion tore the heavy wooden doors from their hinges, and one of them smashed into Baba, nearly

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crushing him. He woke up in the hospital a few hours later with broken ribs, badly bruised, missing his left leg from the knee down. My mother was holding his hand when he opened his eyes.

“Hannah,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze. Then he winced with pain and closed his eyes again momentarily. “Is the baby alright?” he said finally.

“The baby is fine,” my mother said. “Everyone is fine. And you are alive.”

“God is merciful,” he whispered.

That was Baba. A much braver man than I am. And one who eventually paid the ultimate price.

Living as Christians in Baghdad has never been easy, but since the liberation of our country by the Americans it has become a daily race with death. Don’t get me wrong: I welcomed the liberation, and so did most Iraqis. But as Christians, we were afraid that the relative peace Saddam had granted us over the years would disappear once the brutal order he had imposed on the country was shattered. “When they want to make an omelet in the East, they use Christians as eggs,” Nana Soraya used to say. Under Saddam, we had controlled mayhem, organized murder. If you were lucky and kept quiet, you would be allowed to live; some even prospered,

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counting their blessings, holding their breath. Once Saddam was gone, we just had mayhem.

Over the centuries, we Christians of the East have survived the collapse of empires. We have survived wars and pogroms, even attempted genocide. We were taught to rejoice that our suffering allowed us participate in the sufferings of Christ, "so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."<sup>1</sup> We were taught to submit to the earthly Prince, whoever he might be, because only Christ is King. And so we remained unorganized and unarmed as Sunnis and Shias and Kurds formed militias, relying on the new order imposed by the Americans and watching the chaos that ensued like helpless members of a Greek chorus as the tragedy reaches the crescendo of its utterly predictable conclusion. Only rarely in the history of our Assyrian nation have we defended ourselves. Some say that because of this, we have survived.

I am no longer sure.



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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4:13.

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Mojo was working on Abu Hassan's beard when Lieutenant Colonel Danny Wilkens, the S-2 from the Big Snake—Camp Anaconda—came into the small cell. We had worked together before on detainee interrogations, and he was smart, tough, but fair. He was not a large man so he used his brain to break the taqfeer, although once, I saw him hurl a man twice his size against a cinderblock wall, knocking his breath away and his self-confidence with it. They brought Colonel Wilkens in for the hard cases.

“I want all of it off,” he said.

Mojo gave a big grin, waving the shears in front of Abu Hassan's eyes carelessly, snipping the air. He wore blue latex gloves, and had spread a plastic sheet on the cement floor of the cell. His own reddish-blond beard and disheveled hair were ragged from a lack of trimming. The special operators were allowed a license in their personal grooming not granted to regular soldiers, and Mojo was no exception. He wore a red kerchief around his head, making him look like a cross between a woodsman and a hippie.

“Even the moustache?” he asked, pointing the scissors toward Abu Hassan's upper lip.

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"What do you think, Johnny?" Col. Wilkens asked me. "All the Saddamists wear moustaches. It might give us an advantage."

I turned to the filthy Baathist whose wiry black facial hair had fallen in clumps to the floor. I wanted to retch from the smell. "They want to shave your moustache, too," I said. "I can ask them to stop."

"They can do what they like. For now," he said.

"It might be easier to identify him if you leave it on," I said.

"Don't worry. We'll be able to identify him without that. Tell him that we know where the money he brought in from Syria came from. I want to see his reaction," Wilkens said.

So I translated that information. Abu Hassan sneered. "You know nothing," he said.

"We know the name of your contact on the other side of the border," Wilkens said. "And we know the bank accounts he is using in Qatar. You were planning murder. You know, if I hand you over to the Iraqi authorities, premeditated murder carries the death penalty."

As I was translating his words, Col. Wilkens kept staring into his eyes, not aggressively or smugly, but with a hard, even gaze, trying to gauge the man's fear. That was his method. "Fear is your friend," he said once,

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“in the bedroom and in the battlefield.” But I could tell that Abu Hassan was not afraid. “Let’s leave him here to think about his options,” Wilkens said.

His interrogation technique was a far cry from the imaginings of the Western journalists, who screamed about the Americans “torturing” prisoners in Iraq. And while I’m not convinced that using intelligence and cunning was more effective than brute force, I had seen Col. Danny Wilkens get results before, without ever laying a finger on a prisoner. It was almost funny in a way. The Baathists were expecting to be beaten. They were expecting to be striped naked and thrown into a wet cell, and get their genitals wired to an electric generator. After all, that’s what they had always done with their victims. When the Americans didn’t use such techniques, it threw them off. And that’s when they started to talk.

But Abu Hassan was different. For three days, Wilkens would go into his cell with me in tow, and during each interrogation session Wilkens would throw out additional details he had learned about his network, his plans, his accomplices, then dangle in front of him the endless torment he would face at the hands of his fellow Iraqis if Wilkens turned him over to the judicial authorities. Abu Hassan didn’t seem to care. It was almost as if he knew that the

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Americans couldn't touch him, that whatever they discovered about him, he knew just that little bit more about them. As long as he was able to keep his secrets, he was dangerous, and both he and Wilkens seemed to know it.

"Why are you called Abu Hassan?" Wilkens asked him one day.

By this point, the dishdash was gone and he was dressed in clean, orange overalls. His hair had been washed, and his swarthy beard was starting to grow dark on his face.

"Surely you've learned enough by now about Arabic culture, Colonel, to know how we chose our nicknames?"

"So how old is your son? How old is Hassan?"

For the first time in the week he had been in custody, a trace of emotion seemed to trouble the prisoner's reptilian eyes, giving them just a vague hint of moisture. He quickly fought it back, and looked away with self-disgust.

"He is dead. You Americans killed him. One of your F-16s and your 500 pound bombs."

"I keep my son away from the battlefield," Wilkens said evenly.

"You brought the battlefield to us," he replied, the contempt returning to his voice.

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I didn't understand what Col. Wilkens was doing, and I must have let my misgivings show.

"No, you brought the battlefield upon yourselves. Just translate, Johnny. No one forced you to start this war. You could have taken your place in the new Iraq and you would be rich by now. Instead, you chose the coward's way. You chose to fight like women, clawing in the dark."

When he heard these words, I saw a fire light up in Abu Hassan's eyes, and he struggled against the chair. If his wrists hadn't been bound together, he would have tried to strike Col. Wilkens. The American smiled.

"You and your kind are writing a new chapter in the history of Baathism," he went on. "You're not nationalists. That's just the lie you tell yourselves. This chapter is called the Mother of All Cowards."

"We are defending our homeland!"

"No, you're not. You're murdering your fellow citizens."

"They are citizens of nothing." He spat in my direction. "These are the cowards, with their suffering savior who carries his own cross and climbs up onto it without a fight. We will drive them all from Iraq."

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Wilkins got up, and signaled for me to join him at the door. "We'll soon see where the glory lies, *Saddoun*."

He didn't even bother to look behind him as he walked out to take notice of the utter shock that came across Abu Hassan's face at hearing his real name for the first time. But I saw it. No, I relished it. Abu Hassan was stunned. He had completely underestimated the intelligence and cunning of his American adversary. He had been unmasked. Stripped of his anonymity, he was more vulnerable than the poor wretch he had thrown naked into the damp cell. Once we knew his name there was nothing more he could hide. Or so I thought.



Later, Col. Wilkins told me how he knew.

"Every human being has a genetic fingerprint," he explained. "We got Saddoun's DNA from his facial hair. "

"But who did you match him against?" I asked. "How did you know where to look?"

"We *are* the United States of America, don't forget," Wilkins laughed. He was not a large man, but he had a way of uncoiling his

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shoulders in a stretching motion that made him appear much more powerful and larger than he was. “We have big fast computers, with huge amounts of data. And DNA is one of the things that we run on all detainees. We also had to do some detective work. That’s why I asked him about his son. There are several members of his family who have children named Hassan. But only one whose son was killed in a bombing raid.”

Saddam Hussein had three half-brothers, he explained: Barzan, Sabbawi, and Adnan. All three were the sons of Saddam’s stepfather, an illiterate shepherd named Ibrahim Hassan. Saddam’s real father deserted the family when Saddam was a young child, and it didn’t take long for him to develop a deep hatred for his stepfather. The shepherd beat him, and once his three sons were born, he treated the young Saddam like an interloper. By the time he was twelve, Saddam took refuge in the home of a maternal uncle, a cashiered officer named Khairallah Tulfah. He learned to read by the light of an oil lamp and fed his spirit on his uncle’s tales of exploits with pro-German officers in the Iraqi army during World War II. Uncle Khairallah had a dream that Arabs would one day be free of foreign occupation and foreign rule. The Germans were the only ones who respected the Arabs as equals, he told the

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young Saddam. The British were just after their oil. "That's the back story of Baath party ideology," Wilkens said. "Basically, you've got Nazis with hummus."

For the rest of his life, Saddam had a troubled relationship with his three half-brothers. At times, he held them closer than any political ally, putting Sabbawi in charge of the party intelligence apparatus, and giving Barzan control over the family fortune, which he invested in secret accounts in a dozen countries from his headquarters in Switzerland. At other times, they grew apart. At one point in the 1990s, it was rumored that Barzan was flirting with a Western intelligence agency.

Both Sabbawi and Barzan were eventually captured by coalition forces, put on trial, condemned to death, and executed.

"We knew less about Adnan, the youngest of the three," Wilkens said. "We think he was killed during the air raid on the restaurant in al-Mansur on the first day of the war, the raid where we had hoped to get Saddam."

Adnan's son Saddoun had a boy named Hassan, but so did two other of Saddam's immediate family members. One was attending an exclusive boarding school in Switzerland, while the other lived in Qatar with his grandmother, Saddam's widow.

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“When I asked him about his son, I didn’t know about the bombing raid. But I did know where the other two Hassans were,” Wilkens said. “That’s the beauty and the limitation of DNA. You can tell paternity 99.99 percent of the time. But when you’re dealing with a large family such as Saddam’s, you need more to go on.”

So Abu Hassan was Saddam Hussein’s nephew, and his real name was Saddoun Adnan al-Ibrahim al-Takriti. As I repeated it out loud, I felt an uncomfortable shiver run down my spine. Before, I had felt the presence of evil. Now I knew I was facing the Devil himself. And he knew my face, my voice, even my name.



Soraya, my great-grandmother, was born in Tabriz at the turn of the century, when that country was still called Persia. She was widowed at the age of 22, not long after she bore a single son to her husband, Boutros. “I asked God to take me instead, but He had other plans for me and that Issa,” she told me when I was just old enough to remember. We called her Nana Soraya, the grandmother we

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never had. She lived with our family in Baghdad until she died in 1987.

Issa, her son, was my mother's father. His name meant "Jesus" in Aramaic, the language of Christ, the language we still use in church and among family. But from listening to Nana Soraya, he bore little resemblance to his namesake.

Tabriz in 1922, when Nana's husband Boutros was martyred, was in the final throes of the genocide. A Kurdish warlord, secretly in league with the Persians, had recently murdered the young Patriarch of our church and 150 of his best soldiers who came to the Kurd's palace on a mission of peace.

The Kurdish chief put on a banquet in their honor, pledging to set aside generations of bloodshed and form a new alliance with my people. Everyone warned the young Patriarch that it was a trap. His top general pleaded with him not to go. And yet, he acquiesced, clutching to hope for the sake of his people who had suffered mightily from the hatchets and the Remingtons and the scimitars and the butcher knives of the Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians who were bent on eradicating all trace of them from our historic Assyrian land. As the Patriarch and his guard were getting back into their carriages, heavy but joyous from the meal, the Kurd summoned the thousand

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warriors he had dissimulated behind the rocks and in the hollows around his palace, and gave the order to open fire. After the massacre, he went to the Patriarch's carriage and cut off the finger bearing the signet ring he had so recently kissed as a token of peace.

"Here is my token of peace," he said, holding aloft the slain Patriarch's finger and the large ruby ring.

Such were the stories Nana Soraya nourished me with throughout my childhood, cradling me in the ancient walnut rocker she managed to save from their stately house in Tabriz after the mob set it on fire and murdered her husband.

My Assyrian nation, murdered and martyred. And yet rising, generation after generation, like a Phoenix from the assassin's flames.



LTC Wilkens was flipping through a stack of documents the next morning when he called out for me to enter the small office he kept at battalion headquarters. Behind him, thumb-tacked to a portable corkboard, were photographs of Saddoun, the two Syrian

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suicides we had arrested along with him, and another half dozen heads, some of them burned or disfigured beyond recognition—the remains of “successful” suicides. Looking at the pictures, something in me snapped.

“I can’t go back in there, sir. I just can’t. For so many years these monsters were killing my people. You heard him in there.”

“Yes, I did,” Wilkens said.

This wasn’t just any Baathist, but Saddam Hussein’s own nephew! I was still trembling at the thought that I had been in the same room with him, close enough to touch him, and that I was still alive.

“Look, Johnny. You’re one of the best terps I’ve ever worked with,” Wilkens said.. “I don’t want to push you too hard. You have family, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Just on the other side of Mosul. My mom and my kid brother and my two sisters went back up there after my Dad was murdered in Dora.”

“You never told me. I’m sorry to hear that,” he said.

He was young to be a Colonel, barely 40. But there was a depth to him you didn’t always sense in the American officers. His soul had been moved by this war. It was almost as if it was personal for him, just as it was for me.

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“Why don’t you take some time off and go see your family? It’s not an easy time to be a Christian here. Just this morning, the police found the body of Archbishop Rahho, the one who disappeared after saying mass last week in Mosul. He was a personal friend. I could do nothing to find him,” Wilkens said.

“Maybe Saddoun wasn’t involved in that,” I offered. “There are plenty of jihadis to go around.”

“Maybe. But maybe he did know, and I was too slow in breaking him.”

He came around to sit on front of the desk, and motioned for me to take the plastic armchair in the corner. I picked up the stack of paper that was piled on it and handed it to him. He looked at the top document, thought for a moment, then carefully folded back the red cover sheet.

“Any idea what this is? We found it when we went back through the safe house where you captured Saddoun.”

I glanced down at the handwritten script on the top sheet, and did a double take.

“It’s not Arabic or Persian, as far as I can tell,” Wilkens said.

“That’s correct, sir. It’s Aramaic,” I stammered. “The script is similar to what we use in the church. It looks very old.”

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“Can you read it? Give me an idea of what it says? I’ve sent it down to Baghdad for a full translation, but they haven’t sent anything back up to me yet.”

There were perhaps a dozen pages, faint photocopies of what appeared to be a handwritten letter or series of documents, written in beautiful calligraphy with some kind of quill pen.

“We think it might be some kind of code,” he said.

I found it hard to believe that Saddoun and his murderous cronies could be using my language to devise some kind of secret operational handbook. For the text that Col. Wilkens had handed me read like excerpts from a diary, written as a coherent narrative of a most peculiar sort. As I leafed through the pages something gnawed at me, a glimmer of recognition, like a memory on the verge of consciousness, slipping in and out of the light. There was something achingly familiar about these words, but I wasn’t quite sure what it was.

“I don’t think it’s recent,” I said. “Here, listen to this.”

The first two pages appeared to be a fragment. Without the beginning or the end, it was hard to know precisely what they were about. But on the third page there was a date

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and a place name to mark the beginning of a new entry.

**Anno Domini 595, Damascus, Syria**

*Ubul Kassim turned 25 this year, and while in many ways he remains a slow student, with a constitutional aversion to the written word, he has compensated for this illiteracy with a prodigious ability to memorize large strings of numbers and blocks of text, as if he were reading them directly from printed ledgers. This genius of his has already begun to pay off, for the wealthiest trader in Mecca, a woman named Khadija bint Khuwaylid, recently hired him as her principle camel-driver and put him in charge of a caravan of 120 animals and forty armed men! Alas, he knows little of commerce, and would have traded away the entire cargo of hides, raisins, frankincense, myrrh, dried dates, and silver he was carrying for a pittance if I hadn't*

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*interceded on his behalf. As it was, I arranged for a local merchant to pay twice the going rate for his goods, allowing him to take back to his mistress a full complement of rich Damascene fabric and other luxuries as she required. "This should help you to win the good graces of your mistress, Mustafa," I told him.*

*"But she is old, Master. She has already worn through two husbands."*

*"What do you care about this?" I said. "The sooner she completes her days here on God's earth, the sooner her empire will be fully in your hands. You must demonstrate your worthiness to her at every occasion. Soon, because she is an older woman who has no offspring of her loins, she will come to depend on you entirely."*

*I had to pay that trader off with a large purse of good Roman gold from the treasury of our Order. We shall have to consider it an*

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*investment in the future of the church.*

Col. Wilkens just shook his head, quietly chuckling, when I had finished my rough translation of this passage. “Now I see why no one has gotten back to me on this. Do you have a clue what this is all about?”

I must have turned white. My fingers were trembling. I was leafing through the rest of the pages, careful not to meet his eyes, and I was troubled by what I saw. For anyone brought up in my part of the world, the first wife of the Prophet Mohammad, the wealthy trader widow Khadija, was as familiar as their own grandmother. It was something Muslims were taught from the earliest age, and that we as Christians assimilated through an unwanted osmosis. The Prophet of Islam married the richest woman in Mecca, and her money helped him to establish himself and his new religion. But these pages hinted at a much darker secret than the purely mercantile history the Muslims themselves found comforting. There have long been rumors, propagated by Muslim scholars of old, that the Prophet Mohammed received his education, and indeed, a good deal of his theology from a wayward Nestorian monk named Bahira. Could he possibly have

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kept a diary? And if so, what use could it possibly be to Saddoun?

“Sir, would you mind if I took a copy of these pages? Perhaps while I am on leave I can translate them for you. Maybe there will be something in them of interest.”

“Be my guest,” he said.

He made a photocopy of the document minus the Top Secret cover page and gave it to me. Then he reached into his drawer and took out a small box and a pen.

“I’m going down to Camp Cropper in Baghdad with Saddoun. Maybe our civilian friends can get more out of him than I could. But before I go, I wanted you to have this.”

He gave me the box, which contained a commander’s coin from General Petraeus himself, and two of his business card. On the back of one of the cards he had printed an email address.

“If anything happens, contact me using this private email address. You have done invaluable service to your country and to mine. I will make sure that my country honors its debt to you. It’s a dirty world out there, Johnny. Bad things always happen to good people.”

Wilkens didn’t tell me that his tour of duty was up, but there was something fatalistic about his words and his demeanor, as

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if he knew that this meeting would be our last. Perhaps it was just the warrior in him, who refused to fully believe the plans he made for the future, driving him to live so intensely in the present.

Little did I know it as I took my leave of Lieutenant Colonel Wilkens that afternoon, but a new chapter in my life was about to begin--a terrifying chapter, filled with live ghosts and the living dead.