

THE PILATE SCROLL by Michael Byars Lewis

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Port Said, Egypt
The Market District

Samuel Jacobson was a dead man. Or at least *he* thought so. His phone call had been erratic, anxious—almost in a panic.

“Brian, we have to go.” Kadie Jenkins stood and slid her iPhone back in the pocket of her tan 5.11 cargo pants. She grabbed her purse and rose from the table in the back of the tiny restaurant, dragging her nineteen-year-old brother out before they had a chance to order their dinner. The restaurant sat tucked between shops selling hookahs on one side and women’s clothes on the other. The aroma of fresh bread and grilled meats dissipated, replaced by the pungent scent of car exhaust and camel dung.

“It’s only a fifteen-minute walk back to the hotel,” Kadie said. “I bet we can make it in ten.”

Brian stumbled behind her as they hurried along dusty streets. They turned into the souk, or open-air market, the brick-laid section of the market that was pedestrian-only this time of night. While many of the shops had their “roll-up” metal security doors pulled down, the market bristled with life.

Vendors waved items in their faces, children tugged on their pant legs, and beggars held their palms up hoping for a handout. Her eyes studied everyone who came close, gauging their intentions in a moment’s glance. She was one of only a few women in the market not wearing a hijab.

“Kadie slow down,” Brian said. His breathing came deep and awkward, despite being a regular participant in the Special Olympics.

“Sorry, Brian. We could get a cab at the other end of the market. But by the time we find one, describe our hotel, and negotiate a price, we could walk to the hotel.” While she relished the exercise, she worried her pace was too much for him. He was fit for a young man with Down syndrome, but she moved swiftly.

Their team had been in Egypt for almost three weeks. Starting in Cairo, the small group of seven from GDI, the Global Disease Initiative, had been scouring the city for clues to an ancient cure. Their quest had led them from the United States to Cairo, then to Port Said. Their four days here had not yet proven fruitful.

The goosebumps on her skin reminded her of Samuel's phone call. His message was brief yet concise: his life was in danger because he knew what they were *really* searching for. What did he mean? Their team was one of four positioned across the Middle East in search of their goal. Now, for some reason, Samuel questioned what that was.

GDI had been contracted by the United States government to locate an ancient cure for an even older virus—the hantavirus. Kadie researched the topic before they left for Egypt. Rodents generally spread it, and this strain was a particularly virulent “Old World” virus that had proven resistant to modern medicine.

The Central Intelligence Agency learned that ISIS weaponized the hantavirus in aerosol form and planned to unleash it across the West. The virus was known at the CDC to cause hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome. Initial symptoms include fever, chills, blurred vision, back and abdominal pain, and intense headaches known to bring a grown man to his knees. Later, those exposed would experience shock, low blood pressure, kidney failure, and vascular leakage—all in all, a nasty virus to thrust upon any population. The logistics involved in treating the virus were obvious.

The unique thing about the “Old World” hantavirus, was that it had predominantly appeared in Europe and Asia. GDI discovered that the virus had been eliminated in the Middle East, which was odd, as rodents were prevalent throughout the region.

Through one of their many connections, GDI learned of a legendary cure developed in ancient Israel around 30 A.D. The virus had a different name back then, but the symptoms were the same. The cure was a simple combination of plants and minerals. The formula was stored in a vase with Aramaic writing on the side and lay hidden for millennia. That was why she was here. Kadie was fluent in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic. The executive vice president for the Science and Technology Division of GDI had contacted her personally, telling her she was “uniquely qualified” for this job. Kadie was enthralled to join the team when the offer came.

Samuel was in his early sixties, and he and Kadie had struck up a friendship at the beginning of their journey. He became her mentor and father figure, occasionally giving her advice on what to do

with her career. Samuel was the team's expert on carbon dating. His equipment was state-of-the-art, but other than testing its functionality the day after they arrived, he hadn't used it. So, what *did* he discover? What did he know that was worth killing for?

Halfway to the hotel, she mumbled something she shouldn't have as she pulled out her phone and dialed. Her eyes darted toward her brother.

"Do not c-cuss," Brian said between heavy breaths.

Brian. Her moral compass there to steer her back on course. She squeezed her brother's hand. Brian always kept her grounded. What would she do when he was gone? But he was here now, and she needed to make sure he would be safe, something she had done for him since the day he was born.

"Sorry, Brian. I just remembered I need to call Curt. He's probably on his way to the restaurant to meet us."

"He is probably s-still wor—king." Brian's eyes darted back and forth. His speech impediment that made his 'r's sometimes sound like 'w's wasn't nearly as bad as it was when he was younger, and his stutter only showed up when he was nervous.

Kadie grimaced. Curt didn't answer his phone. He was GDI's security man and the only full-time employee on their team. Kadie left a message, telling him she was sorry, but she had to leave the restaurant. They'd talk later.

Next, she called Samuel. He didn't answer either. She slipped her phone back in her cargo pocket and glanced at her brother. He was doing all he could to keep up with Kadie and avoid the distractions of the numerous shops in the marketplace. Gasping, his jaw jutted forward, brow furrowed, and his eyes bulged. He had been reluctant to leave the restaurant; he must be starving. She had to plead with him to get him to budge.

"We did not stay—for food. I am hungry," Brian said.

"I know. I'm sorry. I am, too." Her eyes darted back and forth in search of something they could eat. A few moments later she smiled. Near the end of the market, a vendor baked and sold bread. They stopped next to the giant metal oven that extended back into a yellowing mud-brick building. The bread rolled out of the front like doughnuts at Krispy Kreme, and two men placed the warm food on a rack woven out of sticks to cool. Her limited vocabulary in conversational Arabic helped her in situations like this. Kadie bought two loaves of *Aish Baladi*, an Egyptian flatbread made with whole wheat flour, similar to a pita. Handing the bag of bread to Brian, they continued on their way.

The dust of the market peeled away as they rounded the corner, and their hotel came into sight. Well-lit against the black sky, it sat on the edge of the water where the Suez Canal merged into the Mediterranean Sea. An outdoor restaurant sat to her left; the numerous tables had their umbrellas open, lit candles centered on each table. To her right, a small mosque lay nestled amongst other buildings. This street was far less crowded than the *souk*.

“What do you think about Curt?” Her chestnut-brown hair bounced as she slowed her pace so Brian could keep up. She needed a conversation to take her mind off Samuel.

“He is okay.” Brian looked away when he answered. Kadie knew what that meant. Brian’s instincts on people were spot on, and he wasn’t very fond of Curt. She wasn’t sure why; she was still trying to figure him out herself. Curt was a few years older than her. He was handsome, dashing, and brave—former Delta Force. There was something to be said for that.

They entered the newly renovated hotel, leaving the Third World atmosphere behind them. Kadie sighed as they weaved through the crowded lobby and lumbered up the stairs to their room on the second floor. She dropped Brian off in their room before she went to check on Samuel.

“Don’t leave,” she said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Okay.” Brian moved to the couch and pressed the big green button on the television remote.

Kadie closed the door; the hairs on the back of her neck bristled, and her heartbeat raced higher than usual. She hurried down the hall to Samuel’s room. Inside, she heard a loud crash and the sound of something hitting the wall, followed by a solid thud.

That’s not good, she thought.

Kadie tried the door handle. Locked. She pulled a small FOB out of her pocket. It was called a Gomer, a new device that opened almost any electronic lock. It had wreaked havoc on the hotel industry, but she had picked one up back in the States knowing she’d be living in hotels abroad for three months.

She was hesitant to use it. She shouldn’t just barge into his room. Then came a second thud, followed by a muffled cry.

Kadie swiped the FOB across the lock and pushed hard against the door. The door cracked open about two inches and abruptly stopped; the chain secured on the inside.

“Samuel?” She peered through the gap; a body lay on the floor. *Oh my, he’s had a heart attack.* Kadie lowered her shoulder and bulldozed the door. It started to give way. On the second try, the chain burst free from the wall and the door flew open.

Kadie gasped. In the center of the room, a large man stood over Samuel’s body, wearing a faded brown *futa*, the traditional Yemini male shirt, and black pants. A black *keffiyeh* covered his face, with only his eyes exposed.

The man stood over Samuel, the bloody knife in his hand dripping on the floor.

Chapter 2

Port Said, Egypt
Resta Port Said Hotel

Kadie wanted to scream, but her survival instincts kicked in. She was a fighter and had been for years. Perhaps the assailant picked up on that. When she burst through the door, he hesitated for a brief moment, then fled out the window. Kadie started to follow him but realized he might not be the only one in the room.

She scanned her surroundings until her eyes focused on the bedroom door. Picking up a small but dense statue off the coffee table, she crept toward the bedroom. As she had done at the entrance, she flung open the door and barged in.

Empty.

Rushing back to the window, she found the assailant gone. Kadie set her ad-hoc weapon on the credenza and ran to Samuel. His skin was pale, and his eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, the once white shirt now a deep crimson in front. Her two fingers pressed against his jugular vein, searching for a pulse. There was none. She pulled her portable compact out of a cargo pocket on her pants and placed the mirror under his nose. He wasn't breathing.

Her eyes watered with the realization her friend was dead. Could this be related to his phone call? He was on to something, but what? It was too coincidental for this to happen.

Kadie rose and scurried to the bathroom to wash her hands. She turned on the water and picked up the soap. The blood sullied the white porcelain before disappearing down the drain. She breathed deep, and for the first time, noticed how rapid her heart pounded. After several deep breaths, she washed her face.

She dried her face and hands and hurried back into the living room. She needed to call the police but not until she gathered Samuel's computer and cell phone—in case the police confiscated them for evidence. Their mission was classified. The last thing the team needed was their data in the hands of local police.

The laptop had a flash drive inserted in the USB port. She pulled it out and stuck it in her pocket. Slipping through Samuel's broken door, she scurried down the hall to her room, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Brian was on the couch, tinkering with his drone. The television was on, but he wasn't watching. He looked up as Kadie slipped inside. "Hey—is that computer fow me?"

"No, it's Samuel's. I'm borrowing it for a while." She didn't have the heart or the time to explain what happened to him yet. She was still trying to figure out what to do. Setting the computer and his phone on the desk, she tugged on the window and ensured it was locked. If the killer had come through Samuel's window, there was no reason he couldn't come through hers.

"I'm going back to Samuel's room," she said as she trotted to the door. Her eyes seeped, and she wiped them with the back of her hand. "Lock the chain behind me and don't open it for anyone but me. Don't even answer it. Okay?"

Brian's head tilted. "Okay. What is wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just worried about you."

"I am okay—but something is wrong. I can tell."

Kadie opened the door and peered into the empty hallway. "I'll tell you when I get back. Lock the door behind me, okay?"

Brian nodded and rose from the couch, his drone clutched in his left hand. When she shut the door, she stayed until she heard him lock the chain from the inside. It provided little protection—she had just proved that herself—but it made her feel better. She turned and raced back to Samuel's room.

Inside, the scene hadn't changed. Bending down, she rechecked Samuel, sure that hadn't changed either. He was still dead. Kadie found the phone on a small table by the door and dialed the front desk. She explained there had been a murder and to please send the police to room 212. The clerk didn't understand her the first time, and she had to repeat it. Shocked, the clerk said he'd call the police right away.

Kadie sobbed as she hung up the phone. She spun back toward Samuel and gasped as the Middle-Eastern killer crawled through the window again. Tall and filled out, he still had the *keffiyeh* covering everything on his face but his eyes. Her mind took in as many details as possible when the man's arm shot out like lightning. She retreated until her back butted against the wall.

Something glittery and shiny flew through the air.

Everything moved in a dreamlike state until . . .

THUNK!

The shiny object struck the wall inches from her ear. Her head rolled to the right. A thin-handled silver throwing knife with a wide blade and a stylish, engraved logo remained embedded in the doorframe. The shape reminded her of a fish.

She looked back toward the killer, who pulled another knife from his sleeve. Kadie grabbed the door handle, flung it open, and raced out of the room, slamming the door behind her as a second blade pierced the door. She darted past the tiny clerk creeping toward Samuel's room. The man swiveled to speak to her as the killer burst through the door and crashed into him.

Kadie dashed away as the two men tumbled to the floor. At the top of the staircase, she found an overweight Middle Eastern man halfway up the stairs struggling with an oversized suitcase in each hand. Down the hallway, the killer climbed back on his feet and rushed toward her. Kadie started down the stairs a few steps, then hopped on the sturdy mahogany banister and slid down the rail to the first floor.

The man on the staircase seemed both annoyed and amused as he watched her glide down. When he turned back, the Middle-Eastern killer plowed into him, and the two tumbled down the staircase to the bottom step. The long shirttail of the Kurta rode high, and she noticed the belt around the black pants for the first time.

Kadie searched the lobby for more threats. None in sight.

I've got to lead him away from Brian, just in case.

Without a second thought, she bounced out the front door and into the shadowy streets. Once outside, two more men with *keffiyehs* hiding their faces pointed at her. She ran the opposite direction, away from the water and toward the small nighttime market she had left only minutes before. Glancing over her shoulder, the killer from Samuel's room was right on her tail.

It had been three years since she had been a star on the Princeton women's volleyball team, but she was still in shape. She easily outran the killer, her chestnut-brown hair flowing in the wind, and weaved through the market's crowd once she reached it. Two small boys occupied the middle of the street selling something, and she leaped over their display at the last second. Landing on the balls of her feet, she glanced behind her; she didn't see anyone following her as she accelerated forward.

Finally, she thought, I've ditched these guys. Need to find the po—

She slammed into a vendor's cart as he pulled it across the street, and she fell to the old stone roadway. The cart, filled with Mediterranean fruits and vegetables, wobbled on its rickety wheels. The vendor, a weathered man wearing blue jeans and a green and white athletic jacket, was stunned, though angry words in Arabic soon followed.

Didn't see that coming. Kadie shook her head and felt for injuries. No sooner had she pushed herself off the ground than Samuel's killer was upon her. The man had a *jambiya* in his hand, its curved blade glinting in the early evening streetlight. He reached her as she turned to run, thrusting the knife toward her as she took her first step. She backed up against the cart she had run into; the vendor continued cursing her in Arabic. When the vendor saw the *jambiya*, he stopped berating her and retreated to the other side of the cart.

Kadie dodged to the right at the last second, and the *jambiya* lodged into the wood siding. She ripped a heavy iron pan free and swung it at the attacker. When the dense pan slammed into his head, he crumpled to the ground.

The vendor sidled around the cart and yelled at her again, pointing to the attacker on the ground.

"Sorry," she said, handing him the pan. Glancing back up the street, she quickly realized the other two had found her.

Worse than that, they had her trapped. Each man hurried to load a crossbow, guaranteeing she could never outrun them.

Of course, they have crossbows.

The cart and its dislodged contents cut off any easy escape. Once the bolts locked in place, the two men raised their weapons and fired simultaneously. Kadie dropped to the ground, pounding her elbow on the bricked street. The bolts screamed by at incredible speed, splitting the wood on the cart behind her.

Rolling on the soiled cobbled surface underneath the cart, Kadie rose on the other side and sprinted down the street. She found an unlit alley and ducked in. Peering through the shadows, she had to make a decision—leave the market or find a way to blend in.

The decision was an easy one. Kadie could never blend in; even if she threw a *hijab* over her head, her Western-style clothes and boots would identify her immediately. Her feet slid side to side, as she edged along the wall, keeping an eye out for her assailants.

Something rubbed her hair, and she brushed her hand to push it away. She twirled to the right, and the faint netting increased in both density and resistance.

Spiderweb!

“Eeeeeaaaahhh!”

Her arms flailed, peeling away the wispy cobweb from her hair and face. From a distance, it might appear she was dancing, but this was no dance. Kadie hated spiders. She had even refused to watch any of the Spider-Man movies, from Toby Maguire through Tom Holland.

When the cobweb finally wiped away, she checked the entrance of the alley. Her two assailants blocked her only way out.

Way to go, Kadie. Screaming like a little girl is going to get you killed.

Kadie twirled and raced down the dark alley, figuring it was better to run into the darkness than stay exposed in the light. She used the blackness creeping over the alley to her advantage. She veered left at the end and slipped into an alley between two small buildings. The alley expanded into a clearing and she screeched to a halt.

It was a dead end.

Her head swiveled in all directions and her breathing was heavy. Sweat dripped down her face and her shirt clung to her back. A small stable sat behind one of the buildings, and across from that, stacks of pottery and tools. She wedged herself between a pair of large pots, praying she could hide as the two assailants ran into the alley. Pulling her scrunchy off her wrist, she pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Despite no breeze, the change made her feel more comfortable. She then lifted an over-sized ceramic saucer to hide her face, hoping the object would break up her profile.

Peeking around the edge of the saucer, the two men chasing her meandered across the street. Their heads swiveled in both directions, then strode down the street toward her.

Across the clearing from her, a small, covered stall held a donkey, who ate from a tiny trough of hay. The two men stopped there, searching around the stall. They continued down the along that side of the clearing, looking at every conceivable hiding place, when the unthinkable happened.

TING!

The phone in her cargo pants lit up with a text message.

Brian.

There was no reason to check the phone. When she peeked around the ceramic saucer, the two men taunted her as they reached for new bolts to load their crossbows.