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Chapter 1

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THE LAST KEY

A Novel by

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CHAPTER ONE:

Betrayal

Graham Aidel stopped chopping wood when he sensed the Key Holder approaching his farm. He laid his axe next to the pile of logs, took a rag from his belt, and wiped the sweat from his brow. He looked west, shielding his eyes from the setting sun, past his log barn and toward the grassy lip of the Eagle River valley in which his farm lay. A chilly fall breeze rolled into the valley, swaying the tall grass at the top of the hill.

The Key Holder was just beyond the valley, probably standing on the two-wheel track of the Frontier Way.

"What're you looking at?"

Graham glanced at his wife. Bellia sat in a rocking chair on the front porch of their log home with a book in her lap. Anna squat next to her mother, playing with the colored blocks of maple wood Graham had carved for her, humming a tune only a three-year-old could understand.

Graham scratched his stubbly cheek. "Just the sunset."

Besides Lieutenant Vantos, Graham had never met, nor even sensed, another Key Holder. The memories of a hundred Holders before him told him the same thing. It was simply forbidden. Why would a Holder seek him out when he or she knew the consequences? Or was this just a chance happening, two Holders passing each other in life?

The danger he suddenly felt from his Key made his questions irrelevant. Graham strode to the front porch of his log home, through the door and into the kitchen. He grabbed the crossbow that hung above the hearth. The Andean Army had allowed him to keep it after the truce with Loquath was declared two months ago, a reward for his "valiant service to Andea and the Charter." He had been grateful for the gift -- it was much more accurate than his father's old crossbow. And an extra crossbow on a frontier farm meant a better chance at surviving the next day.

When he walked outside, Bellia's voice was playful but Graham saw concern in her eyes. "Going to shoot the sunset?"

Looking west, he said, "I just want to check on something. I'll be right back." He glanced at his wife and gave her a wink. "Trust me."

Bellia rolled her eyes and smiled. "You said 'trust me' when you told me the war would be over by the end of the summer."

"And it was."

She arched her eyebrows. "Three summers later."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "I'll be right back. It's probably just a wolf."

Bellia looked unconvinced. He could not blame her for worrying, especially with the latest haruun attacks on settlements along the frontier. Just two weeks ago, one of the beasts had surprised six fur trappers traveling up the Pendagrass River. Only one man had escaped. Parts of the other men had floated down river for days.

Graham passed his humming daughter and tousled her auburn hair. She looked up at him and smiled, sending his heart fluttering. He thanked the Patrons that Anna had received Bellia's smile and silky hair over his own beak-like nose and coarse, dark mane. He knew his gratefulness would evaporate once she matured and all the frontier boys came calling on her like bees around a flower.

When Graham stepped from his porch, he was startled by the nauseous wave of danger that radiated from his Key. This time the feelings were stronger, more sinister, the same feelings that he had before combat during the war.

He turned to Bellia. "Maybe you and Anna should go inside until I come back."

Bellia frowned, then rose from her chair and picked up

Anna. His daughter dropped the blocks she was playing with and started crying. Bellia whispered to Anna as she carried her into the house, singing a little song that always seemed to calm Anna's tears. The toddler had already stopped crying when Graham heard Bellia lock and bar the heavy door.

Graham pulled back the string on the crossbow, inserted a bolt, and then marched up the valley toward the Key Holder.

Why would his Key warn him of danger before encountering another Holder? Lieutenant Vantos, who held Graham's Key before him, had been the most honorable and courageous man Graham had ever met. Lying mortally wounded on that blood-soaked field two years ago, Vantos had passed the essence of the Key to Graham, flooding Graham's mind with the memories of all the Key's previous Holders. In an instant, he knew every thought of every Holder for a hundred generations. All five of his senses seemed to increase tenfold, as if he had never used them before that moment. He knew -- remembered -- that the gift and the burden he carried had only been passed on to those whom the Holders knew to be honorable people.

But that was the history of his Key. Was it the same with the other two Holders?

Graham arrived at the top of the valley and scanned the rolling grassland beyond. Two hundred paces below him on the Frontier Way, stood a black horse with a gray-cloaked man in the

saddle. The man had his back to Graham, his head facing the jagged peaks of the distant Shrill Mountains. As Graham stared, the man slowly turned his head. The face was hidden in the shadow of his hood. Even his Key-enhanced sight could not penetrate that darkness.

Brother.

The voice in his mind startled Graham, yet it was calm and somehow familiar. He was surprised by images of a time when he and the possessor of the voice were soldiers, both fighting back-to-back in a desperate battle against a powerful cleric wielding unholy Faith. He could not tell if they were the memories of his Key or the thoughts of the Holder facing him.

Graham tried to answer. Why are you here?

The man started his horse toward Graham. I have come to ask of you a great sacrifice, one that will be sung about for generations.

Graham did not like the way "sacrifice" felt in his mind -- cities in flames, the bodies of men, women, and children lying in crumpled heaps.

What sacrifice?

Bellia's screaming jolted Graham. He whirled around to see two men in chain mail using swords to hack at the door to his house. Graham sprinted down the hill, bringing the crossbow to his shoulder. He aimed at the first man's back and pulled the

trigger. The bolt slammed into the man's neck near the base of his skull. He dropped to his knees, grabbed his throat, blood gushing from the protruding point. Graham had fired another bolt before the second man realized what happened to his comrade. The second bolt struck true in the man's heart. He fell on top of the other, killed instantly.

Graham slowed to a jog near the corner of his barn. He gave quick thanks to the Patrons for--

Danger.

He ducked as the blade of a curved long sword carved the air above his head. A bald, chalk-faced man in a black leather cloak stepped from behind the barn and swung his sword again, this time low. Graham lowered his crossbow to counter the blow. The sword struck the heavy weapon with a loud chunk, almost cleaving it in half. The man swung high. Again Graham blocked the sword, but this time the blow shattered the crossbow. Splinters pelted his face.

He's too strong, too fast...!

Before Graham could retreat, the man brought his blade around low, and severed Graham's right leg at the knee. Graham fell on his back, air bursting from his lungs, pain exploding at the end of his leg.

The pale man stood over Graham, his sword dripping blood, his white face blank as he looked down at Graham. The man's

eyes, though...they were completely black.

Memories of dark times flooded his mind, when men with the black eyes had ravaged Andea, using their Faith to kill while staying immune from the inevitable soul-wrenching feedback that always drove the killer mad.

Blessed Patrons, no, Graham thought. They have returned.

Graham scurried backward, using his elbows and one good leg to push himself along on his back. The man followed. He suddenly raised his sword and drove it through Graham's left shoulder. The point of the blade struck the ground through Graham's back, pinning him in place. Though his Key dulled most of the pain, the sight of that gleaming sword rising from his shoulder, along with his foot lying nearby, made bile rise in his throat.

He knew that the power of his Key was now the only thing keeping him alive. Was this what it was like for Vantos? he wondered. Was this how he felt before he passed his Key to me?

A horse galloped to a stop near Graham. The pale swordsman looked up and smiled.

"The farmer is secure, my lord." His words were heavy with a coarse Guldarian accent. "But your men did not survive."

The Key Holder Graham had seen on the Frontier Way nodded and then stepped down from his horse. He stood above Graham, fists on his hips, grimacing as he looked over Graham's wounds.

The Holder pulled back the hood of his cloak to reveal a tortured face: angry red scars crept up the right side of the man's head from his jaw to the top of his skull, leaving half of his head without hair. A small mottled hole was all that remained of his right ear. Though Graham had never met the scarred man, he knew who he was.

"General Brael?"

Graham's mind was numb from the shock. What was Andea's greatest hero doing so far out on the frontier? Why were his men attacking Graham's house and family? The impossible absurdity of the situation almost gave him fits of mad laughter.

Brael stooped to one knee next to Graham. "I'm sorry for this, brother," he said, regret etched on his disfigured face, "but your sacrifice will save Andea."

Graham tried to speak but the sword in his shoulder made it hard for him to breathe, much less talk.

The general's voice resonated in Graham's mind. Speak with your thoughts. Only I can hear them.

Brael's gaze darted toward the porch of the house. Graham followed his eyes and saw Bellia aiming his father's old crossbow at the Holder.

"Get away from him," she said, her voice firm. When Brael did not move, she said, "I've hit a charging haruun at fifty paces so don't think I can't get you at ten."

Brael stared at her a moment, then said, "Riken."

Graham's Key felt a burst of energy -- but not Faith -- explode from the pale swordsman. A clear, shimmering sphere as long as his arm slammed into Bellia, throwing her backwards into the side of the house. She slid to the porch motionless. Inside, Anna started crying.

"Bellia!" Graham screamed, enflaming the agony in his shoulder and leg.

"Be calm, brother," Brael said. "She is only asleep. No harm will come to her or your daughter if you do what I ask."

Please, Graham pleaded with his thoughts, don't hurt my family. Tell me what you want and I will do it.

Brael looked at him intently, his mouth moving as if he struggled to find the right words.

I need your Key.

Cold dread made Graham shudder, the pain in his shoulder and leg only a distant throbbing. General Brael was seeking to unite the Reaping Keys. From across the centuries, Graham's Key showed him the days when one man had held all three Keys, when they were united in the One Key. He smelled the acrid stench of funeral pyres stacked with hundreds of bodies. He saw entire kingdoms lying in ruins, vultures picking at the remains of horses and children. One man with the Key had done that.

One man could do it again.

You know I can't do that, Graham said with his mind.

The general's face softened, as if he were a healer telling Graham his wife had just died of the Sickness. "I know why you hesitate, brother, and if there was any other way to--"

Brael's eyes glazed for a moment, and then he stood. Looking down on Graham, he said with a hard tone, "If you do not give me your Key, Riken will kill your family. Make your choice now."

Graham looked to the house, and saw the black-cloaked man emerge from the open door holding a wailing Anna in his arms, tears streaming down her red cheeks. He bounced her up and down, whispering to her as if trying to console her. All the while, his black eyes stared at Graham.

Graham's mind screamed with rage and frustration. He had survived three years on the Loquathi front, slogged through the mud of Sickness-ridden trenches, dodged flaming iron from Loquathi cannons, only thoughts of his wife and daughter keeping him sane. He had lived to see them again, to come home to his frontier farm, only to die at the hands of a Key Holder, someone he should have been able to trust with his life.

He had no choice. The burden would have to fall on the third and final Key Holder. He could not -- would not -- watch his family get their throats slit by the evil man holding his crying daughter, no matter what the consequences to the world.

Blessed Patrons, forgive me for failing in my responsibility, Graham prayed. I cannot watch Bellia and Anna come to you before I do.

Brael stared at him, his eyes hard. Is that a yes?

Graham glared at Brael, wishing his gaze could burn the man to ashes. Through clenched teeth, he said, "Pledge to me by Andea, the Patrons, or anything else you hold dear that no harm will come to my family. Pledge to me with your mind so that I can see your intentions."

The general stared into Graham's eyes, and then solemnly knelt on both knees. He pulled a dagger from his belt, took off his right glove, and ran the blade across his palm. He squeezed his hand into a fist, allowing the blood to trickle down his arm and drop to the dusty road. I pledge to you on my blood and the souls of my own dead family, that no harm will come to your wife and child if you give me your Key.

For an instant, Graham saw in Brael's pledge a pain so overwhelming that he momentarily forgot his own. But like a flash of lightning over the plains, it was gone before he could see it, and was replaced with images of Bellia tending the sheep while Anna played with her blocks on the front porch of the house. If Brael was concealing deception, Graham could not find it anywhere in his thoughts, where only sincerity was reflected back to him.

Graham looked up at the darkening sky, the first stars beginning to appear. I will release my Key to you.

Brael sighed, then whispered. "Thank you, brother."

Remembering how Lieutenant Vantos had done it, and over a hundred others before him, Graham put his right hand on the Brael's chest and closed his eyes. He felt a small tingling in his heart at first, then the tingling became an itching, then a burning, picking up speed, until Graham felt like his entire chest was on fire. He felt a rush of energy leave his body and travel up his arm. He opened his eyes to see a shimmering aura envelop the Holder like heat rising from a shield on a hot summer day.

Graham's shoulder and severed leg erupted in molten pain. He heard the deafening screams of anguish before he realized they were his own.

What have I done? he thought, just before the sky faded and the cold darkness embraced him.

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Thallan Brael stood above Graham Aidel's body, looking at his own hands, feeling the wondrous energy from Aidel's Key of Conviction pulsing through him. The heightening of his senses was even more dramatic than when he had received the Key of

Strength. He looked toward the distant Shrill Mountains, saw birds making nests in the pine trees along the slopes. He could hear the gurgling of the brook he had passed on the way to this farm. The scent of honeysuckle surrounding Fort Madia twenty miles off tickled his nose as if he were standing in a meadow filled with the flowers.

Riken Goodier cleared his throat. "My lord."

The interruption annoyed Thallan. He wanted to lose himself in the symphony of sensations. "What?"

"My lord, I hope you did not intend to honor your pledge. The woman has seen us. She will talk."

Thallan turned and glared at his Kindred advisor. "I will not throw away every shred of honor I have left and kill this woman. I pledged a blood oath that she would not--"

"Your plans will not succeed if she talks. My lord."

Thallan's anger at Riken's insolent interruption was soothed almost before it began. Riken's musical voice always seemed to convince him of the right course of action. Thallan glanced at the sapphire ring on his right hand, the ring that Riken had given him not long ago. Thallan admired the way its blue jewel and gold band glinted in the setting sun.

Yes, Riken was usually right about these things.

Thallan turned away and looked toward the trees at the base of the Shrill Mountains, watched a robin feed her young.

"Make it painless," he whispered.

"Of course, my lord."