**The Key**

Father Sébastien’s shoes kicked up clouds of grey ash and they joined the wisps of smoke still snaking up from the incinerated ruins of his church. His life’s work—at least the center of it—gone in a matter of minutes. He mumbled fragments of prayer, to himself rather than to God, worrying the crucifix around his neck with a nervousness informed by some sort of apparent discomfort, perhaps a burden he’d never had to carry before.

The arsonists had come in broad daylight, as if they weren’t afraid of being seen, unfazed by the acts they were so crazed to perform. They had handled him roughly, unimpressed by his authority and the status he thought he had had in the community. They’d told him—sneeringly—that times were changing and that he had to step aside from the onslaught of revolutionary justice. His church had to be destroyed, for it harbored foul vermin, disease-ridden others. They took his key and locked the church door, incarcerating the evil inside before they immolated it—“them,” a necessary sacrifice. The cockroaches. There was nothing he could do. And, God, not for the first time, did not save him.

He’d watched the flames whoosh up into the sky. He’d thought he needed to weep, but no tears came. What had been done had been done. He’d had no choice, surely.

But, Father Sébastien hadn’t expected the screams. They had been so…well, so haunting, so *human*-like. He’d thought that perhaps that was how they sounded, when they were burned up in such a way. But, after the fire had finally spent its bloodlust, the arsonists had unlocked the blackened door—still standing amazingly enough—just to make sure. *Yes, they were gone*, they smirked, then whooped in triumph. *They’re gone, all gone, Father! A shepherd without a flock. What’ll you do now?*

One of the arsonists grabbed Father Sébastien by the arm and dragged him to the ruined doorway. *Take a look, Padre. See?We did a fine day’s work together, no?*

*We?* Father Sébastien blinked, but still no tears.

Father Sébastien stumbled on in the charred remains of his ministry as if he was looking for something. But, there wasn’t much of anything left. Even his prized golden chalice had melted into a twisted, mangled blackness, a fired plastic remnant of his faith, the one that he’d thought would sustain him forever, but, now, perhaps not. No sign of any vermin either. The only things that had at least partially survived the conflagration, it looked like, were some of the older stone sarcophagi, although somehow, he’d noticed, they’d changed their locations sometime during the blaze, now scattered around and lying at all kinds of strange angles.

*Father, you have no choice*, they’d threatened. *It’s either you or them—the ‘roaches. And, if you don’t cooperate, it’s first you, then the ‘roaches. Comprenez-vous?* And, yes, he had understood; he knew that now, vaguely. And, when his foot struck one of the sarcophagi, he almost knew it for sure. God told him so.

He’d expected a stab of sharp pain, most likely in his big toe, but it hadn’t come. The stone unexpectedly accommodated his foot, giving way like a soft cushion to a human posterior. He looked down and the cushion grinned back at him, a ghoulish grin, half-terrorized, half-accusing in that risen-from-the-dead, zombie sort of way.

And then he’d remembered that during the fire he had heard someone cry out, plaintively—Zoé, it almost assuredly was, although he couldn’t be sure—*Father, why hast thou forsaken us?* And, now, he heard it again, softer this time, but in its mutedness it somehow screamed louder than ever. Finally, a tear came to his eye.

Father Sébastien reached into the inner pocket of his cassock, almost afraid of what he might find there. But, the voice of his beseecher forced his fingers forward, digging deeper and deeper into its recesses, the bottom folds where secret, forbidden objects lay, like a cigarette or, God forbid, a remembrance of a clandestine relationship with a lover. And, then, there it was: the key.

*Good choice, Father. I’d knew you’d see it our way.*