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# THE JERUSALEM ASSASSIN

EXCLUSIVE  
SNEAK PEEK!



WASHINGTON, D.C.—15 NOVEMBER

They were coming, and he knew they were coming, and he knew why—they were coming to kill him and to kill the president and to kill anyone else who got in their way.

They were coming to settle scores.

The United States had inflicted too much damage in too short a time. Such actions could not simply be ignored. They had to be avenged. They had to be repaid at the highest levels, starting with the man responsible for issuing the strike orders.

What wasn't clear was when or where the attacks would come or how many were coming or precisely how they would strike. Despite vacuuming up untold terabytes of phone calls, emails, text messages, and other electronic communications over the past month, America's seventeen intelligence agencies had precious little to show for their efforts, and what few leads they had uncovered were infuriatingly inconclusive.

*Yet why let threats of murder and chaos ruin a perfectly good evening?* thought

Marcus Ryker as he stepped out of the shower and toweled off. He had never been one to let himself become paralyzed by fear, and he certainly wasn't going to start now. Growing up on Colorado's Front Range, he had lived to push the boundaries, especially as a teenager, to experience the rush of the unknown, to suck the marrow out of life. He wasn't repelled by danger; he was drawn to it, electrified by it. His sisters accused him of being an adrenaline junkie, and that was probably true. Still, he was no longer as reckless as he had been in his youth. That's what he told himself, anyway. Time and experience and loss and immense pain had, he hoped, refined his most foolish instincts and perhaps tempered them with a bit of wisdom.

Unlocking the wall safe in his bedroom closet, he removed his Sig Sauer P229, inserted a full magazine, chambered a round, and put the automatic pistol in his shoulder holster. Next he withdrew two spare magazines and clipped those to his belt before closing and locking the safe. Though there was plenty of disturbing chatter out there, there was no credible intel indicating attacks were imminent anywhere in the homeland, much less here in Washington. But one could never be too careful.



Marcus got up early the next morning and went for a run, past the Capitol and down the Mall.

When he got back to his apartment, he showered, dressed, and headed to Manny's Diner, just a few blocks away. His buddy Pete wasn't there yet, so he grabbed a booth, ordered coffee, and began reading the *Washington Post*.

By twenty minutes after nine, Pete still hadn't arrived. When Marcus checked his phone and found no text messages or emails from him, he began to worry. Just as he was about to call Pete and read him the riot act, however, a woman he'd never seen suddenly dropped into the seat across from him.

"Hey, old man," she said, grabbing a menu. "What are we having?"

Marcus tensed, though he didn't take the woman for a threat. "And you would be?"

"Your new partner," she said without looking up.

"I beg your pardon?"

“Wow, Ryker, you really are old—lost your hearing, have you?” she quipped, now looking up as the waitress approached the booth. “Coffee—black; scrambled eggs—dry; and . . . do you have asparagus?”

“Course,” said the waitress.

“Good—then a side of asparagus instead of the hash browns, if that’s all right.”

“You got it.” The waitress smiled and turned to Marcus. “And you?”

“Give us a minute, okay?” he said, and she shrugged and headed to the kitchen.

Marcus turned back to the mystery woman across from him. Younger than him by nearly a decade, she looked to be about thirty or thirty-one, with light-brown skin, chocolate-brown eyes, and jet-black hair tied back in a ponytail. She had an athletic build and struck Marcus as a runner. She wore no rings—no jewelry of any kind, actually—and her hands were calloused and strong. Her nails were unpainted and carefully trimmed. She wore a jean jacket over a black turtleneck, and he had no doubt that under the jacket was an automatic pistol.

Before he could speak, she slid a leather case across the table. Marcus recognized it immediately, as he’d recently been given one of his own. Sure enough, when he opened it, he found the woman’s badge and ID. Her full name was Kailea Theresa Curtis, and she was a DSS special agent.

“So, Agent Curtis, what’s your story?”

Before she could answer, though, an explosion pierced the morning calm.

“Just a car backfiring,” the waitress said as she arrived with a mug and pot of coffee. “Happens all the time.”

But Marcus knew better. It wasn’t a car backfiring. It was a Glock semi-automatic pistol firing a 9mm round. It was a sound he had heard a million times before, and it was close.

“Check the back door,” Marcus said as he quickly slid out of the booth. “And make sure the manager locks it.”

Kailea nodded and walked immediately to the kitchen. As she did, Marcus noticed her right hand move almost imperceptibly toward the bulge under the back of her jacket where she kept her weapon.



Brushing past the waitress, Marcus unzipped his leather jacket, giving him quick access to his Sig Sauer, though he didn't draw it yet. As he headed to the front door, he scanned the eyes of the various customers seated about the diner. None of them looked nervous. None of them seemed alarmed. Apparently none of them had even noticed the shot or cared, or they assumed like the waitress that it was a car backfiring. They were simply eating their omelets or reading their papers or doing their crossword puzzles or lost in their smartphones, oblivious to the danger or just numb to it, having lived in the southeastern section of D.C. all their lives.

Marcus stepped out onto Eleventh Street and looked left.

It was now almost nine thirty on a brisk, cloudless, spectacular Sunday morning, the kind of day that made him love living in the nation's capital, especially in the fall. The leaves still clinging to their branches were vibrant gold and maroon and yellow and orange. But nature would have her way. Even those were falling to the ground, swirling along the sidewalks and spinning down the streets amid stiff breezes that signaled winter was coming soon.

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, Marcus looked right.

Again, nothing was obviously amiss. All was quiet. No cars were moving. No trucks. Barely anyone was on the streets, save a few young girls playing jump rope nearby. Marcus heard no pounding of running feet, no yelling, no screeching tires or approaching sirens. The only sound was that of an American flag, its colors now a bit faded, snapping sharply atop a tall steel pole outside the diner.

"All clear out back," Kailea said, coming up behind him. "What've you got?"

Marcus just stared up Eleventh Street, then started walking northward.

"What is it?" she pressed.

Marcus said nothing, but his pace increased. Soon he was jogging, with Kailea hastening to catch up. When they reached East Capitol Street, Marcus stopped abruptly in front of a dry-cleaning shop. He swept left to right, then turned his attention to the nearly barren trees of Lincoln Park. That's when he heard the Glock again. This time four shots rang out in rapid succession. A moment later, an automatic rifle erupted. It was an AR-15, or perhaps

an M4, and the burst was followed almost immediately by bloodcurdling shrieks like nothing he'd heard since Kabul and Fallujah.

*"The church!"* yelled Marcus, and he broke into a sprint.



The shooter was standing behind the pulpit at the front of the room.

When Marcus finally reached the center aisle of the sanctuary, he stopped, but only for a moment. He drew his pistol, said a silent prayer, and took a deep breath. Then he popped to his feet, took aim at the shooter a good thirty yards away, and squeezed off four quick shots. None of the shots found their target, but the man had been blindsided, and now he was under fire from an unexpected angle.

Enraged, the man in the mask began charging down the center aisle, screaming, weapon up, hunting for a target. And that's when Marcus made his move. Scrambling back to the aisle along the left side of the sanctuary, he whipped around the corner, pressed his back against the side of the second-to-last pew in the row, and silently counted down from five. When he got to zero, he sprang to his feet, wheeled around, and aimed the Sig.



*THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE, NOVO-OGARYOVO, RUSSIA*

The twin-turbine Mi-8 helicopter touched down at almost 8 p.m. local time.

Even before its rotors had finished spinning, Nikolay Kropatkin bolted out the side door, briefcase in hand. With three members of his security detail flanking him, the forty-two-year-old acting director of the FSB raced up a freshly shoveled and salted pathway from the helipad to the back entrance of the personal residence of the newly installed Russian leader, Mikhail Petrovsky.

"Ryker is back in the news—a hero, it would seem."

"What are you talking about?"

"Details are sketchy, but a few hours ago, two men entered a church building in Washington, D.C., and began shooting up the place. Police were called. They were on their way. But it seems that Ryker and a woman were

nearby and decided not to wait. They headed into the church, killed one of the shooters, and incapacitated the other. The media isn't reporting the name of the woman, but Marcus Ryker is now the lead story on every news service in the world."

"Incapacitated?" Petrovsky asked. "Meaning what?"

"Ryker blew the guy's kneecap off. Actually, he blew them both off."

"Was it a terrorist operation or something local?"

"It's not clear yet—the investigation is just getting under way."

"Then why come all the way out here to tell me?" the president asked as he headed into a locker room.

Kropatkin followed. "There's more to the story, sir. A senior American official was attending the church when the shooting began."

"Who?"

"Janelle Thomas—she was the deputy secretary of state."

"Was?"

"They killed her," Kropatkin said.

"Why was she there?"

"Reuters is reporting she was a member of the church. Lived close by. Attended every Sunday she was in town."

"Was she the target?"

"Hard to say. Early reports say the shooters were skinheads, fascists from the southern United States who hate blacks, Jews, and Muslims. Thomas was black, but so are most of the people who attend the church."

"I still don't understand why you couldn't have told me all this in our regular briefing tomorrow," Petrovsky said.

"It's Ryker. Reuters is also reporting that he now works for DSS."

"What's that?"

"The Diplomatic Security Service," Kropatkin replied. "It's a branch of the State Department, responsible for protecting American foreign service officers, embassies, consulates, and the like."

"I don't understand," said Petrovsky. "Didn't the American president assure me just a few weeks ago that Ryker was a private citizen, that he was retired, on his own, with no government ties whatsoever?"



“He did, sir—and that’s my point. Clarke also told you that Ryker couldn’t have had anything to do with the assassinations here. He insisted that Ryker left Moscow with Senator Dayton’s entourage, flew back to Washington, and had to be hospitalized with some mysterious illness. Now, suddenly, Ryker’s well enough to be a federal agent, take down bad guys, and get his face plastered all over the news?”

“Clarke was lying to me?”

“I don’t know, sir, but something isn’t right.”

“No, it’s not—find out what, Nikolay Vladimirovich, and do it quickly.”



*THE RESIDENCE OF THE GRAND AYATOLLAH, TEHRAN, IRAN*

“My sons, I have something very difficult to tell you.”

It was nearly midnight when Hossein Ansari dropped the bombshell.

“I am afraid my days have come to an end.”

No one spoke. The Supreme Leader’s inner circle simply stared at their octogenarian spiritual guide in disbelief. As ever, he was dressed in his signature brown flowing robe and black turban. He sat on a mound of pillows covered with thick wool blankets. He had not looked well for some time. Tonight, he looked much worse. His skin was pale and slightly jaundiced. He had lost weight in the past week. His typically neatly trimmed gray beard now looked unkempt, even a bit wild, and the pale-blue eyes behind his wire-rimmed glasses had never looked more tired.

They had assumed his health had been affected by a series of wrenching setbacks, beginning with the triple assassination in Moscow just over six weeks earlier that had taken the lives of Tehran’s three most trusted Russian allies. This had been closely followed by disaster in the East China Sea. They were all reeling from these events, and the initial shock had eventually morphed into searing rage. For none of them was this truer than for Ansari, but he was now suggesting something worse was at play.

“Over the summer I received some disappointing news,” Ansari said without emotion. “I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Stage four. My oncologists advised me that surgery and chemotherapy were options. But

they caught it late. Neither of these measures will spare me from the inevitable. They would merely prolong my agony, and thus I have chosen to decline such treatment. My sons, I have no more than two months to live, if that. I have summoned you to my private study, this place I have come to so love, to express to you all my dying wishes.”

“Whatever you ask, my lord, we will do it.”

“You are most kind,” Ansari replied. “I have only three requests.”

Each man leaned forward to catch every word.

“First, above all else, you must promise me you will continue in earnest our quest for the Persian Bomb. Build it. Buy it. Steal it. But do not settle for a single weapon. You must acquire an entire arsenal—no matter the cost. Is this clear?”

They all nodded.

“Understand this: Iran will never be a great power—nor shall we ever resurrect the glory of the Persian Empire—until we have this ultimate power in our hands. We cannot annihilate the Americans or wipe the criminal Zionist entity off the map until we have this power. Nor can we ever hasten the coming of Imam al-Mahdi, peace be upon him . . .”

“Peace be upon him,” they repeated.

“ . . . until we have the arsenal of the apocalypse in our hands. Never lose sight of this divine mission.

“Second, you must never allow the Palestinian people or their leaders to be lured into a false and final peace deal with the Zionists or the Americans. *Never*. Do not worry about our dear friend and brother Ismail Ziad. He has personally given me his oath. He will go to his grave without betraying our cause. We have paid him well. And I’ve assured him his widow and sons will be well paid too. But Ismail Ziad is an old man. Who will lead the Palestinian people after him? I fear that after Ismail’s departure from this life, a new leader will emerge who is exhausted by the conflict, mesmerized by the Zionists’ lies, bedazzled by the Americans’ bribes, and ready to undermine all we have prayed, worked, and prepared for. You must never let this happen.

“My final request, my sons, is this: do whatever is necessary to kill the

Israeli prime minister and the American president. Kill Reuven Eitan and Andrew Clarke.”



THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON, D.C.—17 NOVEMBER

“Gentlemen, POTUS will see you now.”

At precisely 7 a.m., President Clarke’s executive secretary nodded toward the open door. The Secret Service agent standing post stepped aside, and four men rose from antique chairs and headed into the Oval Office.

The last time he’d been in the Oval Office, Marcus had been serving on the Presidential Protective Detail. Coming back stirred up memories he didn’t care to revisit. He’d sworn to himself that he’d never return. Now, once again, events had changed everything.

The president was sitting behind the *Resolute* desk, absorbed in the *Wall Street Journal*. The four men walked over to the couches in the center of the room and waited. A moment later, Clarke removed his reading glasses, came around the desk, motioned for them to take their seats, and took his own by the fireplace. A steward entered through a side door and served coffee.

“Agent Ryker, America owes you a tremendous debt of gratitude,” Clarke began. “Again.”

“Well, it wasn’t just me, sir,” Marcus demurred. “Kailea Curtis did an incredible job. Just wish we’d gotten there sooner.”

“A whole lot more people would have died if you two hadn’t gotten there when you did. But let me extend my condolences to you on the loss of your pastor. From what I understand, you two were very close.”

“We were, Mr. President. Thank you.”

“I tried to call his widow . . .”

“Maya,” Marcus offered.

“Right, well, I called her last night, but they said she was still in surgery.”

“I just came from the hospital, sir,” Marcus noted. “She’s under heavy sedation.”

“When will the memorial service be?”

“Probably Saturday, but I think Maya will have to make that call.”

"I'd like to attend."

"That would mean a great deal to everyone, Mr. President."

Clarke then turned to his national security advisor. "Where are we with the latest casualty count?" he asked.

"Nine dead, not counting the shooter," General Evans said. "Twenty-seven wounded, including six critically, several of whom might not make it."

Marcus could see the anger in the president's eyes.

"And to top it all off, we lost Janelle Thomas?" Clarke asked.

"I'm afraid so," Evans confirmed. "It's a staggering loss to our team and to me personally, sir. Few people have worked more closely on crafting your Middle East peace plan than Janelle, and she was supposed to fly out with me Tuesday night to help sell it."

"So what was it?" Clarke asked. "Wrong place, wrong time?"

Evans turned to Marcus. "You were there," he said. "What's your take?"

"Mr. President, I believe Deputy Secretary Thomas was the intended target of the attack," Marcus replied.

"Based on what?"

"Well, sir, it's now clear these were professional terrorists. The guy I killed was from Qatar. He traveled to Iraq and joined al Qaeda after we liberated the country. Killed a lot of Americans. Then moved to Syria and joined ISIS. Bugged out to Europe just before the Caliphate fell. Apparently spent most of his time in Italy or Greece; then about six months ago he just disappeared off the grid."

"And the guy you took down in the bell tower?"

"He isn't talking, but his fingerprints are. Born in Turkey. Joined al Qaeda. Fought in Afghanistan. Later in Iraq. Then joined ISIS in Syria. Best we can tell, that's where the two met. Then he, too, drops off the grid. We have no idea where he spent the last year, but our operating theory is that they were together for part of that time."

"And Janelle?" Clarke asked.

"Interviews of surviving witnesses indicate that most of the killings appeared random. The Qatari was spraying machine-gun fire everywhere. But with the deputy secretary, everyone says the guy stopped, studied her

carefully, and asked her name. When she gave it, he shot her four times in the chest and once in the head. No one else was singled out like that.”

Thus far, McDermott had just been taking notes. Now he looked up and said, “Since then, sir, the FBI was able to crack his phone. They found emails he’d received from overseas—Greece, actually—with pictures of Janelle, the address of the church, and the starting time of the service.”

The president set down the cup of now-cold coffee in his hands. He hadn’t taken a sip yet, nor was he going to. He turned to the DCI. “Tell me why they went after her.”

“I can’t, Mr. President,” Stephens replied. “Not yet.”

“Is this part of the retaliation you guys have been warning me was coming?”

“Perhaps, but it’s too soon to draw any conclusions.”

“Has anyone claimed responsibility?”

“No, sir.”

“Do we have any evidence the Russians were involved?”

“No.”

“What about the Iranians or the North Koreans?”

Stephens shook his head. So did Evans and McDermott. Marcus had his suspicions, but for the moment he kept those to himself. Looking unconvinced, the president considered their answer as he flipped through the presidential daily brief, the CIA’s morning summary of the highest priority global intelligence.

Then he suddenly turned and looked up at Marcus again. “You know, Ryker, it wasn’t that long ago I thought you were a traitor.”

“Apparently you weren’t alone,” Marcus replied before completely thinking it through.

“Quite right,” Clarke said. “And now here you are. Guess we owe you an apology as well as our thanks.”

“Not at all. Based on the intel you had at the time, I know my actions looked bad.”

“They did,” Clarke replied. “Very bad.” The president studied Marcus’s face.

“Sir, at the risk of sounding self-serving, may I change the topic?” Marcus asked after an awkward pause.

“It depends,” Clarke said. “What’ve you got?”

“Two things, sir. One, I realize, is above my pay grade, but I’d like to recommend Tyler Reed to be your next deputy secretary of state.”

“Our ambassador to Russia?”

“Yes, sir. With Luganov gone and Petrovsky now in power, a new ambassador to Moscow is probably in order. And I was quite impressed with Reed when I worked with him. He’s smart. Savvy. Cool under pressure. And I think he gets what you’re trying to do, sir. Just a thought, but given how important your peace plan is, I’m thinking you might need to replace Mrs. Thomas rather quickly.”

“And the second matter?” the president asked, noncommittal.

“Well, sir, I need to recommend you give your speech unveiling your peace plan from here in the Oval Office, not from Jerusalem, and certainly not on the Temple Mount.”

“Hold it right there, Agent Ryker. That’s way outside your mandate,” the CIA director admonished his newest hire.

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t believe it is,” Marcus replied. “You guys hired me to counter the blowback we all knew was coming after our recent operations against North Korea and Iran. Let’s be clear: that blowback started yesterday, and it’s going to get worse. Mr. President, I respect your commitment to forging Mideast peace, and your plan deserves a hearing, but strictly from a security perspective, the idea of putting you in Jerusalem right now is a mistake.”

“Noted,” Clarke said with an edge of irritation. “Now if you’ll excuse us, Agent Ryker, you’re dismissed.”



*GHAT, LIBYA—18 NOVEMBER*

The IRGC chief had heard a great deal about this man. They had exchanged numerous coded messages. This, however, was the first time Entezam would meet him in person.



The jihadist's long, flowing hair was entirely gray, almost silver, as was his beard. He was stooped and walked with a simple wooden cane. He wore leather sandals and a white tunic covered by a classic Libyan robe known as the *jard*. As it was nearing winter, this one was made of wool, not cotton, and it was brown instead of white, as was standard in the blistering heat of the rest of the year.

"Commander, welcome," the old man said in almost-flawless Farsi.

"Abu Nakba, it is my honor," Entezam replied.

"How can I be of service, my friend? The impression I received from your request for a personal meeting was of a sense of urgency. I trust everything is well?"

"It is indeed," Entezam lied. "But yes, I have come with a very urgent request, one that His Holiness asked me to deliver to you face-to-face."

"Your servant is listening," Abu Nakba said, setting down his tea and leaning in.

"First of all, the Supreme Leader asked me to convey his gratitude and congratulations for the success of your first operation," Entezam said. "The attacks inside the church in Washington and the assassination of the American deputy secretary of state were most impressive and generated tremendous headlines around the world and great fear among the American people. That said, we also wish to express our condolences at the death of one of your operatives and the capture of the other."

"The price of jihad," Abu Nakba replied without emotion.

"Should we be concerned that your man will talk?"

"Eventually they all talk," the Libyan conceded. "But there is not much he can say. Neither of the men we sent knew anything about Kairos or about me. They're not Libyans and have never been here to the compound. They were contract killers, pure and simple. I am not worried, nor should the Supreme Leader be."

"He will be pleased to hear this, as am I," Entezam said. "In light of this success, the Supreme Leader has commanded me to inform you that he is ready to dramatically expand his support for you and your community, providing you with the funds and the arms you need, on the terms your deputy

expressed to me when I met with him last month in Rome. That said, His Holiness has two names that he needs added to the list.”

“More names?” the old man asked. “How senior?”

“Quite.”

“I need not remind you that the list you gave us is already quite complicated,” the Libyan replied. “And you of all people know that we are still a very young organization, still recruiting good people, still building our assets, still positioning them in a most careful manner.”

“And yet you have just proven your capabilities.”

“The Washington operation went well, I grant you,” the old man acknowledged. “But remember, this was a soft target. The deputy secretary had no security detail. That will not be the case with the rest of the names on the Supreme Leader’s list. Each is more challenging than the one before.”

“We are fully aware of the risks. But let me be clear: these two are personal. And thus, we are prepared to double your fee if you achieve success in the next thirty days.”

“*Thirty days?*” asked a stunned Abu Nakba. “Why so quickly?”

Entezam remained silent.

“Such haste could put at risk all that I have built.”

“Only if you fail,” Entezam said. “If you succeed, trust me when I tell you that you will be rewarded beyond your wildest expectations.”



#### HARAM AL-SHARIF, JERUSALEM

Dark thunderheads were rolling in.

The winds were picking up. The temperature was dropping. There were no tourists to be found. Few locals either. It wasn’t a particularly significant day on the Muslim calendar. It was merely a Monday, and a late-afternoon storm was bearing down on the city where the old man and nine generations of his family had been born and raised.

Amin al-Azzam exited the Al-Aqsa Mosque with the help of his most trusted aide and a hand-carved wooden cane that his father had bequeathed to him on his deathbed. Together, the two men—the eighty-one-year-old

Sunni cleric and his forty-one-year-old son-in-law—worked their way across the plaza. With some difficulty, al-Azzam climbed the steps and passed a small grove of olive trees that he had planted in his youth.

“Come, father, let us sit for a spell,” said the younger man. “You need your rest.”

“It is not rest that I need, my son,” al-Azzam replied, though winded and experiencing great pain in his knees. “It’s privacy. I have something important to discuss with you. But it is very sensitive, and we must be alone, far from prying eyes or ears.”

“Then let me get you inside.”

They soon stepped out of the chilly autumn air into the relative warmth of the octagonal shrine known in Arabic as *Qubbat al-Sakhrah* and in English as the Dome of the Rock. They were certainly alone now. The guards employed by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf—the foundation tasked with administering the entire thirty-seven-acre plaza and its various buildings—had not only cleared the ancient facility of all people but had swept every nook and cranny for listening devices, as they did three times a week.

The younger man helped his elder to his favorite corner, and together they sat on the thick, handwoven carpet, behind an immense marble pillar. It was here that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem—one of the most revered Muslim clerics in the region—liked to come to think and pray and read and meditate. It was here that Amin al-Azzam came to get away from all the noise and the pressures of daily life. And more than any other place, this was where he liked to whisper instructions to the man who had married his beloved youngest daughter, Yasmine.

Hussam Mashrawi was more than family and far more than a mere aide. He was an impressive scholar in his own right, a faithful scribe and personal secretary. He served as the Grand Mufti’s emissary to the rest of the Muslim world.

In reality, however, there were far more differences between the two than al-Azzam cared to notice.

He was convinced that Hamas was not nearly pious nor extreme enough. His placid, unassuming exterior hid his true sympathies, which lay far closer

to ISIS and the teachings of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi than to Osama bin Laden or Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

Mashrawi was not simply opposed—and vehemently so—to the prospect of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The truth was he believed the Jews’ days in the land of Palestine were numbered. He had no doubt that by the time his children were grown, the State of Israel would be no more. That said, it should *never* be replaced by a State of Palestine. Why simply transpose one corrupt, temporal state for another? Only fools and heretics set their sights so low.

What Mashrawi truly longed for, what he prayed for silently, privately, five times a day, was the arrival of the Caliphate. He hungered for the day that the Mahdi, the long-awaited Promised One, would finally be revealed upon the earth, with the prophet Jesus at his side, to usher in the global Islamic kingdom. He hungered for the time when Sharia would be the law of all the lands and the full justice of Allah would prevail. The savior of the Muslim people was coming—the signs of the times were so vivid to Mashrawi—and when that savior came, he would finally judge the Jews, the Christians, the atheists, the agnostics, and the pagans. Indeed, the Mahdi would judge every infidel and do so with fire and fury such as the world had never seen nor imagined.

There were moments when Mashrawi was tempted to confide such thoughts to his father-in-law, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. If anyone would understand him, surely it was Amin al-Azzam. Yet something in Mashrawi’s spirit warned him to keep his mouth shut and his head down and simply keep quietly praying and diligently preparing for the moment when his part in the divine drama would finally be revealed.

“What is on your heart, my father?” Mashrawi asked after several minutes of silence. “You seem troubled. Is there something I can do for you?”

“I am not troubled, my son, but yes, I have something we must discuss,” al-Azzam replied. “But first you must promise me you will not utter a word of what I am about to say to anyone—not until I give you permission.”

“Of course,” Mashrawi replied. “You have always had my discretion.”

“And I have loved you all the more for your loyalty. But this is very sensitive.”

“You have my word.”

“Good—now listen carefully,” al-Azzam said, his voice barely above a whisper now. “The White House is getting ready to release its peace plan.”

“I have heard the rumors,” Hussam replied, fighting not to grit his teeth. He hated the American president and whatever pathetic scheme he was about to propose with every fiber of his being. The road to peace crossed through Mecca and Medina, not Washington and Ramallah, much less Jerusalem.

“It’s more than rumors, Hussam. My sources tell me that emissaries of the administration will be dispatched to the region this week to explain the plan and build support for it. But that is not all. The president is coming here.”

“To al-Quds—to Jerusalem?”

“Yes, and not just to the holy city,” the Grand Mufti replied. “He is coming *here*, to Haram al-Sharif, to the Noble Sanctuary.”

“Here . . . to these . . . these sacred walls?” Hussam stammered, sickened at the prospect yet trying his best not to betray the depth of his emotions.

“Yes, my son.”

“You are certain?”

“Yesterday I received a call from the White House. This morning I received a call from the Shin Bet. An advance team will visit us in a few days. For now, this is all hush-hush. No one can know. Indeed, not even President Ziad. Not yet. Do you understand?”

The younger man did not, but he nodded anyway.

“Hussam, it will be our job—yours as well as mine—to greet the American leader, give him a tour of the great treasures entrusted to our keeping, and serve as faithful ambassadors of our people and our beloved religion,” the Grand Mufti continued. “You must know how conflicted I feel about this. Andrew Clarke shows no evidence that he loves our people. In too many ways, he acts like a puppet of the Zionists. But we must welcome him anyway. We must show him what it truly means to be a follower of Muhammad, peace be upon him, and explain to him the pain and humiliation that we

bear as Palestinians, and the justice we and our people not merely seek but demand.”

“You think he will listen to *us*?”

“Perhaps not. But in receiving him in the best traditions of Arab hospitality, we will earn the right to speak truth to him, whether he wants to hear it or not.”

Mashrawi struggled to focus. A near-blinding rage was rising within him. Beads of perspiration formed on the back of his neck, and his hands grew clammy. He could hear the older man speaking, see his lips moving, but he could not absorb the words; whatever meaning they held was completely lost on him. All Mashrawi could hear at that moment was the refrain “*No, never*” pounding in his head and rising into a deafening roar.

Suddenly it was as if everything went silent. Mashrawi’s pulse began to slow. An unnatural calm began to sweep over him, and a new thought entered his mind. *This was it. The moment he had been told to wait for. The moment for which he had so long prepared. The president of the United States was coming. Here. To this place. This holy place. Perhaps the Israeli premier would join him. Perhaps even the Palestinian president. Imagine. All three in the same room. At the same time. How it would happen, he did not know. But he had no doubt in his mind that these three men were going to die. And he would be the one to kill them.*



We hope you enjoyed your sneak peek of *The Jerusalem Assassin*.

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