

AN AMERICAN CRUSADE

Prologue

WORMS, GERMANY, 1096 – Only one building in town remained to be burned, and Count Emicho's men had already piled fags of wood beneath every window just in case any of the Jews tried to escape. The Count himself supervised the operation, sitting astride his black stallion as the evening faded into twilight.

Over the past two weeks, the Count's army of some ten thousand had been marching down the Rhine Valley toward the Danube on their way to the Holy Land. The Count never subscribed to the religious fervor of his younger brother who joined the Church. But Pope Urban's call for crusade had roused the Count's knights from their rural slumber, offering them someone else to slaughter besides the peasants working each other's lands.

Emicho wearied of festering in his tiny kingdom along the Rhine. Destiny called to him, and the gold collected from the Jews in Mainz had more than covered the costs of his new armor and horses. The remainder of the money rode safely in his baggage cart, guarded by the men he had allowed to enter the city and slaughter the same Jews from whom he had accepted the bribe. "It was not I who killed them," he told Bishop Ruthard afterward, "Who can be expected to control so many hungry men?"

The large orange globe of the sun began to settle past the leafless trees outside the walls of Worms. A gravelly voice drifted to the Count's ears as the temperature began to drop. "God wills it." William the Carpenter sat on the horse next to Emicho, his shirt of mail covered by a white wool halberd with a large red cross sewn over the front.

"And I am his dutiful servant." The smell of pitch burning on the end of his men's torches drifted with the smoke that hung low in the cool evening air. Count Emicho raised two

fingers of his gloved hand and gestured for his men to move forward with a flick of his wrist, signaling them to light the bundles of wood. More torches were tossed onto the thatch covering the roof of the synagogue. Soon the fading light from the sun was replaced by the orange glow of the fire.

The Count's horse whinnied and stepped back as the flames licked up into the night. Emicho dug the gilded spurs affixed to his boots hard in the horse's ribs, forcing the steed to stand his ground. None under his command would be allowed to show the slightest sign of weakness, not even his animals.

Within minutes, clumps of burning thatch began falling into the interior of the synagogue. That was when the screams began. At first there were only a few cries of frightened children mixed with the sobbing of women. By the time the crowd began pounding on the doors chained shut from the outside, the wails of dying men could be heard. In response, his Crusaders began marching around the burning building, shields in the air, singing "Christ We Adore Thee." Their righteous voices drowned out the screams.

"We've found one more, My Lord."

Emicho glanced down to see two of his men holding up an ancient Jew by his arms, the man's broken legs dragging on the ground uselessly. "Show him to me," the Count ordered. A third soldier grabbed the Jew's long, grey beard, hoisting the old man's face up toward his lord. Emicho studied the wrinkled skin for only a moment before commanding, "Add more kindling to the fire."

"Why?" the old man asked, before the soldiers could begin hauling him toward the burning building. "Why do this to us?"

The third soldier slapped the man hard across the face, but Emicho held up a gloved hand to stop the beating. “What is your name, Jew?”

“Eliezer ben Nathan,” the old man groaned.

“Ask yourself, Eliezer.” Emicho leaned down from his saddle. He could smell blood mixed with sweat and urine in the old man’s clothes. “Why would I ride all the way to Jerusalem, when those who killed the Christ infect my own land?”

Eliezer shook his head slowly, and then spoke softly through cracked lips, “As the prophet wrote, ‘cruel foreigners were more plentiful than locusts on the face of the earth...’” His words drifted off as his head sank to his chest.

Emicho sat back up on his horse and waved the soldiers forward, his conversation with the ancient Jew finished. Without hesitation, they dragged the old man forward and threw him through the crumbling doors of the inferno.

Emicho pulled on the reins of his horse, turning the powerful, black animal away from the collapsing walls of the synagogue. The night air was cool on his face with his back toward the fire.

Outside the walls of Worms he could see the dark smudge of black smoke rising past the stars where the other eight hundred Jews burned in the night. To his credit, Emicho had offered to spare their lives if they converted to Christianity; it was not his fault they refused. He pulled his wool cloak forward and tied it across the front, fending off the chill.

Tomorrow they would set off once again for the Holy Land. With the spoils captured that day, Godfrey could now join the crusade. The man had sworn he would not set out for Jerusalem before avenging the blood of the Christ at home, and God had rewarded the man’s efforts with gold. “Emperor Henry will not be pleased,” Godfrey’s councilors warned him. “He

will not sanction crusade against Jews in the Rhineland, lest they raise the interest on his loans.” But the Count felt confident Henry’s anger could be assuaged with the precious yellow metal. *It will cover his interest, and my own...*

Emicho could still hear his Crusaders singing God’s praises as he rode off into the darkness.

Chapter 1

OKLAHOMA, JANUARY – Donations that morning were at an all-time high, even better than they had been for the Christmas service, nearly eleven thousand dollars after only two hours of preaching. Although Reverend Billy Brooks had been in rare form – the sweat dripping from his short, blonde crew cut nearly draining the black-rimmed glasses from his face – the money did not really start rolling in until he healed the homeless man who had been sitting in the back. Once the drifter threw away his crutches, checkbooks flew from the pockets of his large flock.

Now he had to find somewhere to dump the stranger; somewhere no one from his congregation in Muskogee would run across him.

A clump of tumbleweed rolled across the frozen parking lot of the Greyhound bus station in Shawnee, over one hundred miles from the Church of God and Jesus Christ. Billy pulled a roll of five fifty-dollar bills from the inside pocket of his black suit jacket and held it out in front of the homeless man. The man began to reach for it, but Billy pulled it back. “Now ya’ll listen here, son.” He tilted his face down so the man could see his blue eyes clearly past the thick rims of his glasses. “I ever see yew ‘round these parts again, ya’ll’r gonna need those crutches. Understand me?” The homeless man shrank back in the passenger seat and nodded his head up and down twice. Then he began to hesitantly reach for the money again.

Billy slapped the roll into the man's unwashed hand as quickly as he could without touching it. Having to walk out of the church arm-in-arm with the filthy beggar had been bad enough; Billy would be happy to avoid any more physical contact with him.

The homeless man pulled the roll of bills in toward his ragged winter coat and started to reach for the door handle of the black Lincoln. It was locked, and he pulled at the lever uselessly, his eyes growing wider as he stared at it in silence. Billy's voice boomed once again in the confines of the car. "Now ya'll get on the first bus 'vailable and get on outta' here. Ya' hear?"

With a loud thud Billy released the locks on the doors, and the man nearly tumbled out in his desperation to escape. Faster than Billy thought the old man could move, he stuck a scrawny hand in through the rear door and pulled out his stained, US Army duffel bag, leaving the worn wooden crutches lying in the back seat. Billy would throw them in the trunk later, where he kept the prop for just such an emergency.

Billy sat behind the wheel, watching until the homeless man dragged his bag into the bus station. He could see the bearded face peering out from inside the glass doors when he finally pulled away in a cloud of dust and snowflakes.

Before pulling out onto Highway 18, Billy reached over the seat back to grab the plans for the new church he was going to build, a bright house of God full of windows through which the whole congregation could see holy light pouring down on their preacher every Sunday morning. An FM radio studio would carry his message to all of Oklahoma and halfway through Texas, well beyond the measly thirty-some odd counties that listened to him now on the AM station.

As he leaned past the seat where the homeless man had been, the sour smell of unwashed clothing stung his nose. “Dammit” he growled, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “That’d better come out.” He ran a hand over the leather and sniffed it, immediately regretting the action.

Billy pulled out a handkerchief, wiping it hard across his fingers in an effort to rid himself of the man’s filth. He then rubbed the seat down before gruffly throwing the white cotton cloth out to be swept away by the wind gusting over the miles of dry grass. The rancid odor lingered when he rolled up the window, so he turned the heater fan on high letting the blast of warm air wash across his face.

There was no time to stop and get the car cleaned; he had a budget meeting with the Church operating committee in two hours. One of the councilmen’s boys could wash the Lincoln while they were planning the Lord’s work. *I’ll have Sara give Joey Jr. a twenty from the collection, seein’ as it’s so dang cold out.* He was feeling generous after the flush of cash received that morning.

Billy gunned the engine and headed back toward home.

Chapter 2

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS – “And exactly when did you abandon your heavenly father, Professor Hallowell?”

Jude Hallowell had just started signing his name on the title page of his latest book, *Faith in the Modern World*. He stopped halfway through the “H”, the delicate loop and staff forming the left hand leg of the letter looking abandoned without the cross member and the other leg. He set the Waterman fountain pen down on the table next to the book and closed the cover, stopping

briefly to admire his name in large block letters prominent against the photograph of a boarded-up church. He leaned back in his chair, but decided not to fold his arms lest he appear confrontational in front of the crowded Borders in the CambridgeSide Galleria. Instead he smiled, flashing the boyish grin and blue eyes that the cameras adored. *I hate these mall bookstores signings...*

Jude extended his right hand. "I don't believe we've met." His voice, perfected by ten years of lectures at Harvard, showed not the slightest hint of defensiveness. "You are?"

The man standing in front of him must have been at least sixty-five, maybe seventy. An untidy mop of white hair tried desperately to escape from beneath his wool cap. Intense grey eyes stared at him through harsh wire-rimmed glasses. Rather than take the proffered hand, the old man clutched his Bible tighter, his rosary prominently displayed hanging past the wrinkled hands.

Jude kept his hand extended for a moment longer, and then withdrew it, brushing back his stylish black bangs. He had gotten his hair cut the day before, knowing that the bookstore would be crowded for the signing. *And well it should*, he thought, *six consecutive weeks number one on the New York Times best-seller list*. At least forty people waited in line for him to sign a copy. The two ladies behind the old man leaned past his black raincoat, eyes expectantly fixed on the author to see how he would react.

"I think there must be some confusion," Jude smiled and winked at the lady to the man's right, "my father doesn't live in heaven, he lives in Newark. You must have the wrong man."

The crowd surrounding the table broke out in laughter at Jude's witty remark, and conversations that had gone silent at the old man's pointed question restarted. Several of those waiting in line clapped as though Jude had just birdied on the eighteenth hole.

“Now, can I sign a book for you?” Jude reopened the cover and took the cap off his pen.

“That book is an insult to God.” The old man shook his Bible, the cross on his rosary tapping against the well-worn leather.

”Well maybe I can sign a copy for him then. What’s his name?” More chuckles from the crowd. Jude held his pen expectantly over the book.

The old man waved the Bible once more, but found no words to express the anger Jude could see welling up in his wide eyes. *Oh shit, he’s gonna snap.* Jude exuded as much calm and self-confidence as he could. He had already faced worse at other book signings. *At least this guy’s smaller than me.* Jude could take him if he had to.

The store security guard finally stepped up beside the old man and grasped him by the arm. “It’s time for you to go, sir,” he ordered.

The old man glanced at the guard, tilting his head back as he tried to focus on him through the bottoms of his bifocals. The corners of his mouth turned down and his brow furrowed before he spat a breath of air at the man. Then, with one last shake of the Bible, he let himself be led away from the table.

The woman next in line stepped up to the table and grinned, pretending to wipe sweat from her forehead. “That was close,” she said, widening her eyes in mock fear and wagging her head.

Jude waved it off with an elegant sweep of his hand that held the pen, as though he were autographing the air itself. “Everyone has a right to his or her opinion, I should hope.” He winked at the woman. “Now, what’s your name?”

“It’s Mary, Dr. Hallowell,” she said with a slight giggle.

To Mary, Jude signed, and then finished the “H” he had left undone. He handed her the book. “Thanks for reading.” He gifted her with a couple of seconds of his blue eyes, and then turned his attention to the next reader in line, flashing his smile.

His graduate-student-turned-personal-assistant kneeled down next to him, whispering in his ear, “I’m so sorry, Jude, I thought he was holding a copy of your book. I didn’t see the cross.”

“I’m Lizzie,” the next lady in line offered, and Jude began writing the name on the title page of the next book from the stack on his left.

After he finished signing it, he handed it to the lady with a smile. Then he turned briefly to his assistant. “Let another one like that by, Beth, and you’re fired. And so is your thesis.” His voice was quiet, but far from delicate. The girl’s eyes widened and she stood quickly, turning her back to him. She grabbed a napkin from the table holding coffee and cookies and began dabbing her eyes.

Jude had been growing tired of her anyway. There was a new redhead with perfect breasts in his class he had his eye on for the last two weeks. She would be happy to have him as her advisor.

Jude pulled another book off the stack. “Your name, madam?” he asked.

Chapter 3

NEW YORK CITY – Sam Levin swirled the twenty-five year old Macallan in his glass and then stopped to watch as the liquid continue to spin; three ice cubes made from distilled water clanked against the Waterford crystal. The amber-red whiskey reminded him of his mother’s hair before his father had died. It was not long after that her brilliant tresses had gone gray. *So young*, he

thought. He shrugged his eyebrows and sighed, then brought the glass up to his lips as he raised his gaze out over the New York City skyline.

The New Year had barely begun, and the sun was setting early over the streets of Manhattan. Far below his penthouse window at the Ritz-Carleton, snow lay thick over the leafless trees of Central Park. He raised the glass one last time and downed the rest of the Scotch, leaving the ice cubes to rattle in the glass. To drink it so fast was wasteful, but he could afford it. *I could toss the rest out the window, if I wanted to.* In his mind he could imagine the bottle shattering amidst the horse carriages rolling past the park, tourists on cell phones under thick blankets startled by the explosion of breaking glass. The image amused him, and for a moment he smiled.

But Sam would never do something so wasteful. He had struggled too hard to get to where he was, and nothing would stand in the way of where he was going. Every investment he made was a calculated risk. *Hardly a risk. I know exactly what I'm doing, even in this market.* He looked out again over the city, imaging the buildings as chess pieces. If he could, he would capture every one of them, adding each investment to his collection. *Hell, he thought with a grin, maybe I will.*

He set the empty glass on the marble top of the Louis XV serpentine console table beneath the window. The Ritz staff would collect it in the morning when they cleaned the room. Streetlights began coming on in the city below. Sam grabbed the remote off the arm of the sofa and turned on the Bloomberg news. Images of that day's inauguration of President Maines flashed across the screen.

Sam kept the volume low and only half listened to sound bites from the inaugural speech that echoed those he had heard at the Republican National Convention: "I pledge to the

American people that I will not relax in our war on terror. No God-fearing American citizen should have to go to sleep at night worried about whether he might be dead the next day.” There was really no need for Sam to keep the noise down. No one else resided in the apartment that might get disturbed by it; in fact, no one had been there in years. But Sam wanted to finish the sudoku he had started earlier. The mental exercise kept him sharp, and it was a game he could play alone.

There were only a dozen boxes left on the grid when the mumbling drifting over from the television caught his ear. He lifted the remote and increased the volume. “...has become a common response OPEC announced today it will cut production by another two percent in an attempt to raise the continued stagnant world oil market.”

Sam muted the volume but continued to stare at images of sheiks leaving a building in Algeria and climbing into a row of black Mercedes. “Serves the bastards right,” Sam said to the silent screen, and then turned the television off.

Might cut back on attacks in Jerusalem, he considered, tapping his pen on the newspaper. *Maybe now my donations to ZOA might do some good.* He made short work of the last few boxes on the sudoku grid and set the puzzle aside. After clicking off the lamp next to the sofa, he walked to the closet to put on his coat. Although he always ate alone, Sam still went out for dinner every night. Maintaining a presence about town was an investment in marketing himself. Besides, there was no food in the apartment anyway.

On his way to the door the lights of the buildings he had scanned before caught his eye out the window. *How many will come up for sale?* he wondered, considering the downturn in the oil economy. He slipped on his black wool coat, making a mental note to have his staff compile a list of buildings downtown owned by Middle Eastern sheiks and corporations. *Have*

to keep an eye on those. Might be able to catch a bargain or two. He had just purchased the One Liberty Plaza building, moving his offices to the top floor of his latest acquisition. But he was always ready to own more real estate in Manhattan.

Sam glanced in the beveled glass mirror hanging next to the door and with one gloved hand brushed down what little hair was left on his mainly bald pate. He made sure to shut off all the lights before heading out for the evening.

Chapter 4

OKLAHOMA – “I jus’ don’ know, Billy.” Jimmy Sutton raised his cream colored Stetson and brushed back his grey hair before covering it up immediately with the felt hat. “I jus’ don’ see how we can raise this kinda’ cash.” He leaned further in over the architectural drawings for the new church that Billy had spread out on the table. “I mean, another fifteen million dollars is a heap a money. Maybe ya’ll could scale this back a bit. Whadda’ y’all think?” Jimmy glanced back and forth among the other six members of the operating committee for the Church of God and Jesus Christ. Billy had always insisted there be seven members on the board; it was a heavenly number in Revelations, after all, and twelve was a pain in the ass.

The room at the back of the aging church building fell silent. Joey seemed particularly interested in the far corner of the ceiling, and Lucy searched for something in her large, leather purse as she shrank down in her chair.

Billy felt a swell of pride when he saw their reactions, although he would never let it show. Still, he understood his faint-hearted flock and knew exactly how to take advantage of it.

The Reverend Brooks cleared his throat loudly in the confines of the small room, and then pushed his glasses firmly up his nose. Jimmy sank back onto the hard plastic chair he had

been seated in before the comment. Billy waited until everyone was still before drawing himself up to his full six feet, holding a Bible covered in red leather in his right had. “Oh ye of little faith.” He shook his head back and forth and stared down at the floor, delaying the moment he would look up for added emphasis. “Oh ye of little faith...”

Billy walked back and forth in front of the group, enjoying the dead silence. “Those were the words of our Lord and Savior at Matthew 8 verse 26 when his disciples – those very ones chosen to be apostles – were more worried about the waves from a storm then they were about the wrath of God.” He stopped and turned, looking each one of the board members squarely in the eye. Or at least trying to; Joey was still examining the ceiling. Lucy sank further into her chair. “This building’s not for me,” he said quietly, puckering his lips and frowning, “Oh no, not for me.” He took a deep breath, preparing for his next words. “It’s for the Lord.” His voice shook the room, finally forcing Joey to look at him. “And with God, all things are possible.” The word “all” was said with such force Billy thought maybe the windows had rattled a bit.

In three long strides he was at the table gathering up the plans he had so carefully laid out before the board members. When he was done, he tapped the roll twice on the end, making sure the sheets were neatly aligned. Then he glanced back at Jimmy, still sitting silently in his chair. “I just want all y’all to remember that.” He held Jimmy’s gaze for a practiced five seconds before releasing him. Then he turned quickly on his boot heels and headed for the door leaving them all to contemplate their devotion.

“Small minded sons of perdition, that’s what they are.” Billy shook his head, speaking to the frozen cornfields that stretched for miles along Highway 10 as he drove home after the

meeting. *Gonna have to find me a replacement for Jimmy if he keeps that up.* Billy was not about to buck any resistance to his glorious house of praise.

At least Joey Jr. had gotten the rancid smell out of the front seat. Billy sniffed the air. *Well, most of it, at least.* He got the black Lincoln detailed every Monday anyway. The boy's efforts would hold him over until then. He had worked for an hour out in the freezing cold just to earn the twenty dollars. Billy could give him credit for the added effort, but the price still remained the same.

The sky was clear, but the fields of corn stubble were starting to grow dim as the weak January sun neared the end of its short day. Billy sped along the road in silence turning over Jimmy's words in his head. *I'm gonna need to find me some real donations.* He wondered who in rural Oklahoma could ever bring in the amount of cash he needed for the new building and radio station.

He passed under the Muskogee Turnpike as the Kum & Go sign up ahead flashed to life, backlit by the setting sun. Billy glanced down at the gas gauge; it was nearing empty. Not surprising, considering how far he had driven that day to rid himself of the morning's healed drifter. The large engine in the car was a thirsty beast. He pulled into the station without bothering to signal on the lonely road.

Who's workin' this now? Billy wondered, shifting the car into park and shutting off the engine. Back in the day, Lyle...*Lyle something...* from his congregation had run the place. The grimy man always came running out of the garage to pump gas for the Reverend, and then refused to take any money for it. But the poor soul had died several months back. Billy only remembered bits and pieces of the funeral, having gotten through it in record time before an

appointment with the architects. He had not heard whether the widow sold the business or not. Either way, no one readily appeared to pump his gas.

Billy pulled on his gloves and stepped out. The winter wind racing across the empty fields bit into his cheeks forcing him to turn his back while he filled the car. Even with the depressed price of gas, the large tank of the Lincoln still cut sharply into the church's monthly operating budget. *It's all for the Lord*, he thought, watching the numbers click by on the old mechanical pump.

With a clunk the flow of gas stopped, and Billy slipped the nozzle back into the pump. It took a myriad of small steps to cross the icy parking lot without slipping on the smooth leather soles of his boots. With some relief he made it to the station, swinging the door open and feeling the warmth of the air on his face.

Without looking up, Billy stepped to the cashier and gingerly peeled three twenty dollar bills from his wallet. He laid them on the counter, and then saw the dark skin of the hand that reached for them. Standing behind the register, a Middle Eastern face smiled back at him as the man deftly made change from the drawer. "Thank you stopping by," the man said, handing Billy a few dollars in return.

Thank you stoppin' by? Billy stuffed the bills in his pocket, refusing to return the smile. *Can't these people even learn themselves English?* A whiff of the man's body odor drifted over the counter to assault Billy's prominent nose. It reminded him of the homeless man who had left the reek on the seat of his car. He clicked his tongue against his cheek and pushed his glasses back up. Then he stomped the melting snow from his boots before leaving the station.

"First it was the blacks, then the Mexicans..." Billy glanced at the retreating sign of the Kum & Go in his rearview mirror as he pulled out onto the highway. "And now this." He

puckered his lips as though he had just tasted something sour and shook his head again. “This is God’s country, dammit.” He allowed himself to swear when alone in the car, figuring the Lord would understand so long as he never cursed in front of the flock. “Someone needs to do something about all these god damn ferriners.”

Chapter 5

NEWARK, FEBRUARY – No matter how full his schedule, Jude always kept one Sunday a month free to make the four-hour drive back to Newark to visit his parents. He felt it was the right thing to do, or at least felt obligated to do it. Either way, he rarely stayed for dinner anymore, using the distance home as an excuse to leave early.

Welcome to New Jersey, the sign on Interstate 95 read as his silver Audi sped over the Hudson River. Jude grew up in Newark, but had rarely felt at home there since his father’s accident, the resentment only building as the years passed. And while his new book criticizing religion’s role in politics had distanced him from his parents, they were good enough Christians to still welcome him back for his monthly visit. *How ironic*, he thought, considering the price they had paid for their faith.

He crossed the Passaic River and took the long exit onto the Pulaski Skyway, stopping briefly at the toll booth to toss a handful of quarters into the basket. The Ryder truck in front of him on the entrance ramp sprayed his car with salt and grime from the wet, snowy surface of the road. With a sigh of disgust, Jude turned on the windshield wipers in an effort to clear the mess. The dirt smeared across the glass, further impeding rather than improving his vision through the windshield. “God damn trucks.” His colleagues always chided him about his use of religious colloquialisms, but he dismissed it as nothing more than a meaningless part of the English

language. He sprayed the windshield with washer fluid and accelerated past the truck and into the fast lane, ignoring the solid white channelizing line on his left.

At Wilson he exited into the neighborhood of his youth. Memories of riding his bicycle along the cracked city streets down to Independence Park effused him with a fleeting moment of nostalgia, but it was quickly overcome by resentment for the reasons they had been trapped in the aging suburb. *Never did get the new bike dad promised me before he lost his job.* Jude shook his head in disgust, and turned onto Walnut.

He parked the Audi across the street from the two story house squeezed between a brick apartment building and boarded up storefront, careful not to scratch the wheels on the high curb. Thick moss sprouted from the green asbestos shingles covering the east wall of the house where it was buried in the constant shade of the apartments. A leafless rose vine wound up wrought iron posts and spread over the roof of the tiny porch. His father had not been capable of maintaining the place in years. Jude noticed several shingles missing from the roof after the past winter's high winds. He could already hear his mother's voice in his head, "Why don't you come down for a weekend and help your father fix the roof? It would be good for the two of you to spend more time together, especially now." But spending time with his father was getting harder as time went by; it was a constant reminder of the problems religion had caused in his world. He made a mental note to call a roofer when he got back home to get the shingles fixed before his mother could ask him a second time.

The front door opened, and between two SUV's Jude could see his father's hunched form appear in the shadows of the entryway. He raised his arm to wave, but could barely lift his hand above shoulder height. Jude's father had been a tall man once, working hard everyday at the dry docks on Kearny Point building ships. Then he hurt his back in an accident, and no amount of

medication seemed to abate the ever worsening pain. Finally Jude's mother had talked him into going to a faith healer. The crazy man prayed aloud, trying his best to work the congregation into a religious fervor before laying his hands on Jude's dad. With a shout the man had twisted his father's back so hard that he fractured seven vertebrae. They went home to continue praying, the adrenaline rush of the evening concealing the extent of the damage. By the time his father could no longer get out of bed on his own, his spine had begun its long process of degeneration leaving him with a permanent hump and powerless right arm despite the doctor's best attempts at reparation. When he finally returned to working, it was selling papers from a small metal stand to the men who had once been his co-workers. Neither his father's self-esteem nor his finances ever recovered from the experience.

Although his parents prayed ever more intensely as time went by, Jude never stepped into a church again, a decision he had stuck to despite the young age at which he made it. Even before entering college he started participating online in forums and blogs discussing organized religion, a veritable feast of intellectual fodder confirming what he already knew: religion was the root cause of much of the world's sorrow. In his position at Harvard, Jude was finally in a position to prove that to everyone else.

Why do I come back here? he wondered, unlocking the door of the car. He was seemingly religious in his devotion to his parents, even to the point of always coming on a Sunday. The irony of the situation stung deep in his psyche, almost to the point of physical pain. He looked through the tinted car window at the smiling face of the old man who now stood on the porch waiting for him and knew the answer to his question. With a sigh he opened the door. *It'll all be over someday, probably sooner rather than later.* His father had developed a severe

cough over the past winter; fluid collecting in the right lung from the pressure of the collapsed shoulder, the doctor had said.

Jude stepped out onto the street, slamming the door shut and hitting the lock button on the key fob. He waved high in the air so his father could spot him past the parked SUVs and tried his best to smile. “How are you feeling dad?”

Chapter 6

NEW YORK CITY – By the time the sun rose over Brooklyn, Sam was already drinking coffee in his new offices on the 54th floor of One Liberty Plaza. Ever since childhood, Sam’s mother taught him to watch the sunrise, regardless of the season. “For better health,” she would say. But Sam figured it was just her way of getting the two men in her life out of bed early so she could have some time to herself. By the time he was eleven, he was the only man left in the house.

The coffee had been waiting for him when he arrived that morning, as it always was, brewed to perfection by his personal assistant, David, who had been making his coffee for twelve years. Other than the ebbing tides of the real estate market, Sam was resistant to change. He liked those around him, and his coffee, to be the same from year to year. Moving his investment company to a new building had been a traumatic experience requiring an hour or more of sudoku every evening to refocus his mind. Fortunately, David always arrived in the office before he did leaving the carafe of steaming brew on Sam’s desk, helping steady him for the new day.

Sam sipped the particularly dark brew and watched the wash of amber morning light spread across the city. The day’s pollution was only beginning to accumulate, and the air still

seemed clear. *At least as clear as it ever is in New York*, he thought, setting the cup back down on its saucer with a gentle clink.

Gazing out over Brooklyn, memories of his childhood crept into the empty spaces of his mind along with the creeping morning light that started to fill the city streets. He looked across the East River, picturing the small pickle shop where it had all started.

Sam's mother and father had both emigrated from Poland as children, carried along by their families as they fled the chaos following World War II. "This is the land of opportunity," his father said repeatedly, despite the fact he barely made the rent on the shop each month, "make something of yourself." So as Sam grew he was determined to take advantage of every break that came his way.

That first opportunity came when his father was beaten to death by Neo-Nazi's while walking to the pickle shop one summer morning in 1969, leaving Sam to fend for the family. The beautiful amber hair on his mother's head turned white nearly overnight. *She aged so quickly after that...* A single tear rolled down Sam's cheek; with his right hand he quickly wiped it away and lifted the coffee cup, taking another sip of the strong brew to fend off the feelings he had battled for so long.

Fortunately, Sam's father had the foresight to invest in life insurance. He had, after all, experienced the way a family's tides could turn without warning in pre-war Europe. The policy was a prophecy doomed to be fulfilled. But that settlement kept Sam and his mother funded through his college years, an opportunity he might otherwise not have had, and it gave them some money to buy his first investment, the small shop where his father had once made pickles. Star Investments, Ltd. was born. *At least he did something for us*, Sam thought, shaking his head slightly as he squinted into the rising sunlight.

Even as his fortunes seemed to be brightening, Hava died just shy of her forty-fourth birthday. She had fulfilled her role as a mother, withering away in the absence of her husband's love. Sam took a long draught of the coffee, hoping the caffeine would steady his emotions. *Why wasn't my love enough, mother?* Watching her fade despite the care he offered had made Sam feel like a lesser man than the memories of the dead father he competed with, and he never forgave Hava, or any other woman, for that judgment. *At least I didn't abandon my family...* Sam saw the end coming, and, like his father had done for himself, he took out an insurance policy on his dying mother. That decision racked him with guilt as the years past, as though he had somehow lost faith and sealed her doom. He had not been to temple since her funeral.

Nonetheless, the policy provided Star Investments with the flush of cash it needed. In the end, he would show his mother, and everyone else, what kind of man he was. *And I don't need some strange woman by my side to prove it.*

He took a deep breath and held it, closing his eyes and feeling the warmth of the sun on his cheek. It felt like the warmth of his mother's skin. His eyes began to tear again. *Mother...*

The Blackberry in his suit pocket buzzed harshly, yanking Sam from his reverie. He placed the cup and saucer on the glass-topped table by the window, and then lifted his wire rimmed glasses while he squeezed the moisture from his eyes with his fingers. He set the spectacles back down on his nose and let the breath go, ready for the day.

Sam pulled the phone from his pocket and answered it. "I have the list you asked for earlier this week," David said, "properties in Manhattan owned by Middle Eastern investors. Would you like me to bring it in?"

"Yes, please." Sam hung up the phone and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He could not allow David to see he had been crying.

David swung the glass door of the office wide and swept into the room, setting the folder containing the report delicately on the desk. “Will there be anything else, Sam?”

Sam remained across the room, his back to the rising sun, forcing David to squint and lose focus lest he see any hint of redness in Sam’s eyes. “No, thank you David. That will be all.”

“Well, let me know if you need something.” David walked away toward the door, his every step as graceful and fluid as a practiced dancer’s movements.

Sam admired the swing of the younger man’s hips. Despite their difference in age, he and David had been in an on again-off again relationship for ten of their twelve years of acquaintance. To Sam it had never been serious, merely a fling. He was never quite sure how David felt about it, having never asked. *He understands*, Sam reassured himself.

When the door finally swung closed, Sam ventured over to his glass and metal desk. It did not yet feel as comfortable as the dark cherry 18th century Federalist behemoth he had sat behind at the old office, but David had persuaded him that it represented the future where Star Investments was headed. Sam hoped he would feel as comfortable behind it someday.

He settled gently into the leather black leather chair and adjusted his glasses before opening the report. The pages were still warm from the laser printer.

Before him lay a map of Manhattan, a dozen plats highlighted in red along with more properties colored green and yellow. Attached was a listing of priority purchases with building descriptions and assessed values, followed by secondary and tertiary recommendations. Highlighted in blue were his own properties, including the tower in which he was currently perched. He studied the blue box representing One Liberty Plaza. Not only did he like the name, he also knew it would accrue significant value once the new Freedom Tower was finished.

He wished he had been able to buy the building when the Twin Towers were still standing. *What a view that would have been.*

Sam shook his head and flipped to the end of the report. *Nice work*, he nodded absently, deep in thought. He had always made sure to surround himself with only the best people, just like any other investment he made.

The sun rose higher, streaming through the windows and flooding the office with its brightness. The electronic blinds automatically adjusted, muting the light to a preset level.

Sam poured himself another cup of coffee from the carafe on his desk and began studying the reports. With the expected profits, he would be able to donate more to the Zionist Organization of America in support of their battle against the Arabs, those people Sam considered the Nazi's of his own day.

We'll pay them back, Mother, I promise...