

**AN AMERICAN CRUSADE**  
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**Prologue**

WORMS, GERMANY, 1096 – Only one building in town remained to be burned, and Count Emicho’s men piled fags of wood beneath every window in case 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 marched down the Rhine Valley toward the Danube on their way to the Holy Land. The Count never subscribed to the religious fervor of his youngest brother, the one destined for the Church. But Pope Urban’s call for crusade roused the Count’s knights from their rural slumber, offering them someone else to slaughter besides the peasants working his 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 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 allowed to enter the city and slaughter the same Jews from whom he 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 hanging low in the cool evening air. Count Emicho raised two fingers of his gloved hand and gestured for his men to move forward. A mere flick of his wrist sufficed to set the bundles of wood ablaze, consigning those within to flames and death. His men tossed more torches onto the thatch covered roof of the synagogue. Soon the orange glow of fire replaced the sun’s fading light as sparks leapt and danced through the air.

The Count’s horse whinnied and stepped back as the flames licked high 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. Then the screams began. At first only a few cries could be heard past the crackle of the fire, those 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 rent the night air. In response, his Crusaders marched around the burning building, shields held in the air, singing “Christ We Adore Thee.” Their righteous voices drowned out the screams of those who had murdered the Savior.

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

Emicho glanced down to see two of his men holding an ancient Jew by his arms, the man’s broken legs dragging uselessly on the ground. “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 haul 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 lifted himself back into his saddle and waved the soldiers forward, his conversation with the ancient Jew concluded. 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 felt 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 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 came in that morning at an all-time high, even better than collections 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 washed the black-rimmed glasses from his face – the money did not really start rolling in until he healed the homeless man sitting in the back of the old, white church Billy's father built. But once the drifter threw away his crutches, checkbooks practically flew from of the pockets of his numerous flock.

Now he needed to find somewhere to dump the stranger, somewhere no one from his congregation in Muskogee would accidentally stumble upon 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 in front of the homeless man. The man began to reach for the money, but Billy pulled it back. "Now ya'll listen here, son." He tilted his face down so the man could see his green eyes clearly past the

thick rims of his glasses. “I ever see ya’ll ‘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 twice. Then he hesitantly reached for the money again.

He slapped the bills into the man’s unwashed hand as quickly as he could without touching him. 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 additional physical contact.

The homeless man cradled the small roll of bills to 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 silently. 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 onto the frozen gravel 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 peeled 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 determined 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 a handkerchief from his suit jacket, 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 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 would be no time to stop and get the car cleaned; the budget meeting with the Church operating committee began in only two hours. One of the councilmen’s boys could wash the Lincoln while they planned 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 could not help but feel generous after the flush of cash received that morning.

Billy gunned the engine and headed back toward his church and home.

## **Chapter 2**

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

Jude Hallowell had begun 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. Jude leaned back in his chair, but decided not to fold his arms lest he appear confrontational. Fans crowded into the Borders at the CambridgeSide Galleria waiting for his signature, and every one of them meant more money in his pocket. Instead he smiled, flashing the boyish grin and blue eyes that the cameras adored. *I hate these mall bookstores signings*, he thought, hoping his expression had not changed.

Jude extended his right hand. "I don't believe we've met." His voice, perfected by ten years of lectures at Harvard, carried 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 fought 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 hung prominently over the wrinkled fingers the chain entwined.

Jude extended his hand 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, *twelve consecutive weeks 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 in opposite directions past his black raincoat, eyes expectantly fixed on the author and 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.” He picked the Waterman off the table and twirled it between his fingers.

The crowd surrounding the table responded with laughter to Jude’s witty remark, and conversations silenced during the old man’s pointed question restarted. Several of those waiting in line clapped as though Jude just birdied on the eighteenth hole. The noise attracted a few wandering customers in the direction of his fans, bookstore gawkers turned potential purchasers.

“Now,” Jude cleared his throat before continuing, “Can I sign a book for you?” He 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 faced worse at other book signings. *At least this guy’s smaller than me.* Jude figured he 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, his voice as firm as a twenty-something kid could be.

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 his Bible, he allowed himself to be escorted from the store.

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, miss?”

“It’s Mary, Dr. Hallowell,” she replied, a girlish giggle following her words.

*To Mary*, the pen swept effortlessly over the title page, and then finished the “H” previously left undone. He handed her the book. “Thanks for reading.” Jude gifted her with a couple 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 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 a book taken from the stack on his left.

When the book had been signed, 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.

His interest in her had been waning of late, motivated in part by a new redhead with perfect breasts he had been studying for the last two weeks in the front row of his class. *She'd love having me as her advisor*, he thought with a smile. The woman in front of him smiled back stupidly.

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 continued 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 died. After that, it did not take long for her brilliant tresses to turn gray. *So young*, he thought. He shrugged his eyebrows and sighed, then brought the glass up to his lips as he turned his gaze out over the New York City skyline.

Not three weeks of the new year had yet been spent, and the winter sun set early over the streets of Manhattan. Far below the window of his suite 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 might seem wasteful, but Sam could afford it. *I could toss the rest out the window, if I chose 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 struggled too hard besting the goals set for himself early on, and nothing would block the road leading to his future. Every

investment made was a calculated risk. *Feh. Hardly a risk.* He puffed a breath of air through pursed lips. *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. *Ohmain,* he thought with a grin, *maybe I will.*

He placed the empty glass on the marble top of the Louis XV serpentine console table resting beneath the window. The Ritz staff would collect it in the morning when they cleaned the room. Streetlights began flashing to life in the city below, their first blue glow sparking to a bright white in seconds. Sam lifted the remote from the arm of the sofa and turned on the Bloomberg news. Images of the 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 heard already 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 would be disturbed by it; in fact, no one had stayed much longer than after-dinner coffee, let alone slept overnight, in years. But Sam wanted to finish the sudoku started earlier. The mental exercise kept him sharp, and it provided a source of entertainment where he could be alone.

Only a dozen boxes remained on the grid when the mumbled words 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 breathe some life into the continued stagnant world oil market. Whether member states or other oil producing nations will follow their lead is currently being debated..."

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 *manzers* right,” he spat at the silent screen, and then turned the television off.

*Less money to fund attacks in Jerusalem*, he considered, tapping his pen on the newspaper. *Maybe now my donations to ZOA they 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 slipped off his house shoes and placed them side by side on the floor. Although he always ate alone, Sam still dined out every night. He considered his maintaining a presence about town as an investment in marketing himself. Apart from crystal and fine china, the shelves in the apartment sat empty.

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 pulled on a black wool coat, making a mental note to have his staff compile a list of properties owned by Middle Eastern sheiks and corporations. *Have to keep an eye or two on them. Just maybe catch a few bargains*. He had recently completed his purchase of the One Liberty Plaza building, moving his offices to the top floor of his latest acquisition. But he always kept himself 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 remained on his balding pate. He made certain 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 thick, grey hair before covering it again with the felt hat. “I jus’ don’ see how we can raise this kinda’ cash.” He leaned further in over the architectural drawings of the new church Billy spread across the table. “I mean, thirty million dollars is a heap a money. Maybe ya’ 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 always insisted there be seven members on the board; seven was a heavenly number in Revelation, after all, and twelve would just be a pain in the ass to control.

The conference room in the back of the aging church building fell silent. Joey Thornton seemed particularly interested in the far corner of the ceiling, and Lucy Bowen searched for something in her large, leather purse as she shrank down in her chair, the bag covering her small frame nicely as she slid down behind it.

Billy felt a swell of pride observing their reactions, although he would never let it show. *Like the master molds his clay.* 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 onto his nose. Jimmy sank back onto the hard plastic chair he had been seated in before the comment. Billy waited until everyone sat still before drawing himself up to his full six feet, holding a Bible covered in red leather in his right hand. “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 strode back and forth before the group, enjoying the dead silence. “Those were the words of our Lord an’ Savior at Matthew 8 verse 26, when his disciples – those very ones chosen to be apostles – worried more ‘bout the waves from a storm than they did the wrath of God.” He stopped and turned, looking each one of the board members squarely in the eye. Or at least he tried to. Joey still examined the ceiling. Lucy sank even 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 focus on him. “And with God, all things are possible.” The word “all” came forth with such force Billy thought maybe the windows rattled a bit.

In three long strides he reached the table and gathered up the plans so carefully laid out before the board members, who stared and said nothing. The air conditioner kicked on, its breathy hum the only noise in the room beside the crinkled sounds of paper being hastily rolled. When he finished, Billy 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 jus’ want all y’all to remember that.” He held Jimmy’s gaze for a practiced five seconds before releasing him. Then he spun on his boot heels and headed for the door, leaving them all to contemplate their devotion.

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“Small-minded sons o’ perdition, that’s what they are.” Billy shook his head, speaking to the frozen fields stretching out from the road along Highway 10 as he drove into Muskogee after the board meeting. *Gonna have to find me a replacement for Jimmy if he keeps that up.* Billy had zero tolerance for any who would resist his glorious house of praise to God.

At least Joey Jr. cleaned the rancid smell of the homeless man out of the leather covering the passenger 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. Joey Jr. did work for an hour in the freezing cold to earn the twenty dollars. While Billy gave the boy credit for the added effort, the price in hard cash remained the same.

The sky shone clear as the road merged with State Route 62, approaching the Arkansas River, but the fields of stubble started to grow dim as the weak January sun neared the end of its short day. Billy sped along the road in silence turning Jimmy's words over in his head. *I'm gonna need to find me some serious dollars.* He wondered who in rural Oklahoma could ever provide the amount of cash needed for the glorious new building and radio station he envisioned.

He passed across the river and 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 to find it nearing empty. Not surprising, considering how far he had driven that day to rid himself of the morning's healed drifter. The engine in a car of that size could be a thirsty beast. He turned left across the east bound lanes without bothering to signal and pulled into the station.

*Who's workin' this place now?* Billy wondered, shifting the car into park and shutting off the engine. Not too long ago, Lyle...*Lyle something*...from his congregation ran the business. The grimy man always came running out from the garage to pump gas for the Reverend, and then refused to accept any money for it. But the poor soul had died several months back. Billy only remembered bits and pieces of the funeral, having managed to complete it in record time before an appointment with the architects. He had no idea whether the widow sold the station or not. But the change seemed to have resulted in a lack of service, as no one readily appeared to pump his gas.

Billy pulled on his gloves and stepped out. The winter wind racing across the empty fields north of Muskogee and bit into his cheeks, forcing him to turn his back while he filled the car. Even with the price of gas having dropped during the last few months due to overproduction in the Middle East, 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 reached 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 foreign face smiled back at him as the man deftly made change from the drawer. "Thank you stopping by," the attendant 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 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 turned left out onto the highway. "And now this." He puckered his lips as though he had 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 somethin' about all these god damn ferriners."

## **Chapter 5**

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY, FEBRUARY – No matter how full his schedule, Jude always kept one Sunday every month free for the four-hour drive back to Newark and a visit with his parents. He believed it to be 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 R8 Spyder 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 distanced him from his parents, they were good enough Christians to continue welcoming 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 leading the way along 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 like grease, 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 passed quickly, overcome by resentment for the reasons his family had been trapped in the aging suburb. *Never did get the new bike dad promised.* Jude shook his head in disgust, both at the memory and at himself for reliving it, and then 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 of his car on the high curb. Thick moss sprouted from the green asbestos shingles covering the east wall of the home where it sat 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 became progressively more difficult as time went by, a constant reminder of the problems religion caused in Jude's world. He made a mental note to call a roofer when he got back home to Cambridge. Paying to get the shingles fixed would relieve him of having to talk his way out of her question 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, hard-working man once, investing his youth

building ships at the dry docks on Kearny Point. Then he hurt his back in an accident, and no amount of medication seemed to abate the ever worsening pain. Finally Jude's mother talked him into enlisting the services of a faith healer. The crazy man prayed aloud, screaming at the top of his lungs, working the congregation into a religious fervor before laying his hands on Jude's dad. Calling upon god with a frenzied voice, the man twisted his father's back so hard that he fractured seven vertebrae. They went home to continue praying, the evening's adrenaline rush 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 at last he returned to working, it would be selling newspapers from a small metal stand to the men who once worked alongside him on the ships. Neither his father's self-esteem nor his finances ever recovered from the experience.

Although his parent's faith gained in intensity – out of desperation Jude always felt – he never stepped into a church again, a decision he clung to despite the young age at which he made it. Even before entering college Jude participated online in forums and blogs analyzing the merits of 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 finally found a platform from which he would prove that to everyone else.

*Why do I come back here?* he wondered, unlocking the door of the car. He could almost be called 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, nearly 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, and he knew the answer to the question that plagued him. 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 his 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, the Audi beeping a secure confirmation. 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 fifty-fourth 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 saw through the guise to her wisdom, getting the two men in her life out of bed early so she could have some time to herself. By the time he turned eleven, he was the only man left in the house.

The coffee waited for him when he arrived that morning, as it always did, brewed to perfection by his personal assistant, David, who had made his coffee for twelve years. Other than the ebbing tides of the real estate market, Sam resisted change. He liked those around him, and his coffee, to be constant from year to year. Moving his investment company’s offices to a new building had proved 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 would soon tint the view with a brown haze, but at

that moment the air still seemed clear. *At least as clear as the world can be 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 bathing the city streets. He looked across the East River, picturing the small pickle shop where everything started.

Sam's mother and father both emigrated from Poland as children, carried along by their families as they fled the chaos following the Second World War. "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 became determined to take advantage of every break that came his way, and create opportunities when one did not.

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. *Oi! 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 troubling him for so long.

Fortunately, Sam's father had enough 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 became a prophecy doomed to fulfillment. But that settlement kept Sam and his mother funded through his college years – an opportunity he might otherwise not have – and it gave them some money to buy his first investment, the small shop where his father 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 brighten, 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 would make 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 did for himself, he took out an insurance policy on his dying mother. That decision and the financial fruits it bore racked him with guilt as the years passed, as though he had somehow lost faith and sealed her doom. Sam 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, tearing 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. If you would.” Sam disconnected the call and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He did not want his assistant knowing he had been crying again.

David swung the glass door of the office wide and swept into the room, setting 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 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 engaged in an on again-off again relationship for ten of the twelve years they were acquainted. For Sam it had never been serious, merely a fling. David would come over, have dinner, they would share some time together, and then David would leave. In ten years, David never spent the night. Still, he sometimes wondered how David felt about it, yet he never asked. *He understands*, Sam reassured himself.

When the door finally swung closed, Sam ventured over to his new desk. The glass and metal structure not feel as comfortable as the dark cherry 18<sup>th</sup> century Federalist behemoth at the old office, but David persuaded him it represented the future where Star Investments headed. Sam wondered whether he could continue adapting to all the changes the future held. *Perhaps I am getting too old for all of this?* He settled awkwardly into the leather black leather chair and adjusted his glasses before opening the report, the pages 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. A listing of priority purchases accompanied the diagram

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 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 construction on the new Freedom Tower finished. He wished he had been able to buy the building when the Twin Towers still stood. *Halevei, what a view that would have been.* He glanced out the window at the machines and men scurrying about the construction site, mourning briefly for past losses.

Sam shook his head and flipped to the end of the report. *Nice work*, he nodded absently, deep in thought. He always made sure to surround himself with only the best people, 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 pre-set level.

Sam poured himself another cup of coffee from the carafe on his desk and began studying the report in earnest. The anticipated profits would allow him to donate more to the Zionist Organization of America in support of their battle against the Arabic nations, those people Sam considered the Nazi's of his own day. The donations allowed Sam to fight his battle without damaging his business.

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

## **Chapter 7**

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS – “Is it appropriate to employ suicide bombing in defense of religion?”

Four weeks into the new winter semester Jude considered the curious faces of yet another group of college seniors at Harvard, leading them in a discussion of the ways in which religion wreaked havoc on the world scene. His latest question raised the eyebrows of many of the over one hundred students in his class. Several of them already shook their heads, answering with an emphatic, “No.”

“I know.” He raised one hand and shook his head in agreement. “To the vast majority of those of us living in the West, the question seems ridiculous, not even worth asking. We can’t imagine going to church one Sunday and having the minister or the priest ask us to strap a bomb to our chest and go blow up a mosque or a Jewish center down the road in the name of God.” Those previously shaking their heads ‘No’ now nodded in agreement. “And yet, when the World Community Research Center polled some thirty thousand residents of Muslim countries with this same question, what do you think the answer was?” Jude scratched his head in a practiced gesture of wonderment, bathing in the rapt attention of his students, especially the red-haired Lisa sitting in the front row. Several of the Middle Eastern students avoided his gaze.

With the press of a button on the remote, the screen above Jude’s head flashed to life. “Here are a few select results. Complete results of the survey can be found in chapter four of my book, the details of which you’ll be studying as this semester progresses.” A glance around the room confirmed a copy of *Faith in the Modern World* rested on every desk, required reading for the winter semester’s class and an assurance he would pay off the new Audi before year’s end. “As you can see,” he turned his own attention to the screen, knowing all the students would follow his example, “in Lebanon and the Ivory Coast, over half the population believed it acceptable to protect Islam with suicide bombings.” He paused to let the figure sink in before turning back to the class. “Over half.”

“Nigeria, Bangladesh, Jordan,” he paced before of the lectern at the front of the hall, raising his voice so it would carry throughout the room, “all these countries had large portions of the population who believed suicide bombing to be an acceptable means of defense.” Jude locked eyes with a Pakistani student sitting toward the back of the room; the man instantly averted his gaze. Jude continued rolling forward.

“And these results don’t even include some of the worst countries in the world,” he ticked them off on the fingers of his left hand, “Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, and Palestine.” More students shuffled uncomfortably. “Believe it or not, it gets worse.”

The numbers on the screen wavered and changed, the percentages growing higher. “When World Community Research tallied their figures, they just included those who believed it was often or sometimes justifiable. But large portions of these populations also believed it was rarely justifiable as well. And when it comes to bombing civilian targets, isn’t that just as bad?” With a dramatic sweep of his hand, Jude led the student’s eyes up to the screen. “When you add those numbers in, the percentages in the countries we’ve already mentioned begin to soar up near three-quarters of the population. And Mali and Senegal now join the ranks of those with over half their people willing to blow themselves up for the cause of Islam.” Several students visibly squirmed in their chairs. *Not my fault*, Jude thought, *it’s just the numbers*. For a moment Lisa caught his attention in the front row, an odd expression decorating her fair face as Jude drove his point home. He assuaged her with a quick grin and moved on.

“Even Turkey, considered a moderate Muslim country, had over a fifth of its people say it was acceptable to use suicide bombing to protect Islam. And out of a population of some two hundred million people, even a fifth is a threat that should be taken seriously.” Even though he faced the students, Jude knew above his head the screen showed a map of Turkey quickly filling

with red dots representing all the people willing to die for their religion. Soon the map would turn completely red before the screen went black. He waited a moment for the graphic to have its full effect on the class, watching the reaction on the face of his students.

“Islam, more than any other religion, has all the makings of a cult of death. How can anyone look at those numbers and fail to see the danger of letting religion influence government?” Jude glanced around the room, shining his best camera-ready smile. He wondered briefly whether some of the students sitting in the back row might get sick, but chose not to worry about it. “The West is not at war with terrorism,” he said, stepping back behind the lectern at last. “No. It is at war with Islam.” He dropped his hands forcefully on both side of the heavy oak slab forming the lectern’s top. In his eyes, Lisa beamed with pride, even though her smile might seem a bit tempered. *Maybe she’s a little too young*, he thought momentarily, and then dismissed the thought with a glance at her legs.

The hour had nearly expired, and several students seemed ready to bolt from the classroom. He decided to let them go early. “Class dismissed. See you on Wednesday.” Half a dozen Middle Eastern males fled from the room. Jude considered whether they might drop the class, or even complain to the dean, and then shrugged it off. *I’m tenured*.

His cell phone beeped once, and he pulled it out and studied the face. A text message from Lisa appeared on the screen. “C u 2nite?” it read. In the front row she slipped her phone back into her purse. Jude winked at her once, and then left the room quickly before any of the other women noticed.

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Jude sat in bed responding to the day’s email on his laptop. Next to him, her back turned toward the light spilling from the lamp on the nightstand, Lisa’s breath sougled gently. He

paused for a moment to admire the shape of her shoulders and her round hips, smiling as he did so, and then turned his attention once again to the computer's screen.

Three new requests for guest lecturing had arrived that day, and his agent wanted to set up another round of signings to keep his book on the *New York Times* list. He might have to take a few weeks off from classes, but his TA's could fill in.

He shuffled the emails off to his personal assistant's inbox to let her deal with the arrangements. She might be on her way out but still provided a useful service for the time being. In a moment of grace he decided to tell the review committee to approve her thesis before he cut her loose, knowing they would follow his lead during the defense despite his being ten years their junior. He was, after all, the rising star in the Sociology Department, and everyone always wanted to hitch their wagon to a rising star. "It's the least I can do," he mumbled to himself, folding closed the screen on the laptop.

Jude took a sip of pinot noir from the glass sitting on the night stand, and stopped again to admire the curves of Lisa's back. *Better wrap things up with Beth*, he thought, setting the laptop on the floor and turning off the light. He planned on having a new assistant before the next book tour began.

## **Chapter 8**

OKLAHOMA – "Why's this feller wanna' meet me?" Billy Brooks questioned the church secretary without a care for the irritation he could hear in his own voice. He had fought icy roads all day praying with some of the congregation's more wealthy members and not an ounce of patience remained to talk with some poverty-stricken radio listener begging for a complimentary faith healing.

“Says he wants ta’ speak ‘bout your sermon this Sunday past.” Sally’s voice shook as she stumbled over her words, apparently in a rush to answer Billy as quickly as possible. “Says he shares y’all’s concerns ‘bout all the foreigners in these parts.”

After his encounter the week before with the Arabic man taking over a Kum & Go station that belonged to one of his flock, Billy had been in rare form that Sunday past, preaching against all the foreigners in America, the country’s dependence on foreign oil, and the democrats, more or less in that order. While donations flowed in fairly well afterward, they did not quite meet Billy’s expectations, considering the subject matter.

“Well, can’t blame a man for seein’ the truth,” Billy said, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “Whad’ you say this feller’s name was?”

“Um...” Post-It notes flew as the young woman scrambled to find the note again. “A Mr. Parrish.” She proudly displayed a pink slip of paper sticking to her palm. “Mr. Gabriel Parrish.”

*Parrish... Parrish...* Billy knew the name from somewhere. He ran one hand over his short-clipped blond hair as he rolled the name over in his mind. “Y’all said ‘Gabe Parrish’?”

“Yes’m Reverend. At least, that’d be the name he gave me,” she responded sheepishly.

“Well praise be.” Billy slapped a hand on his thigh. “That man’s richer than Midas.” He recalled the story on Fox News about Gabriel Parrish, an oil tycoon with offices at his family’s homestead in Nacogdoches, Texas. *But that’s gotta be over three hun’ert miles from here.* Billy never imagined his radio signal carried so far. If he played his cards right, Billy could only imagine the kind of money Gabe Parrish might donate to his new church.

“Well give me his number, girl.” He leaned over and snatched the paper from the secretary’s hand. “Can’t keep a man like Gabe waitin’!”

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The next day Billy drove his black Lincoln the six-hours down to Nacogdoches, where he found himself sitting in the waiting room outside Gabriel Parrish's office. On the wall opposite the couch hung a painting of a sunset that looked to Billy like it could have been from a little father west in the southern Rocky Mountains. He stood and shook out each leg, still a little stiff from the long drive, and then advanced on the painting.

He heard a chair creak and glanced over his shoulder to see the forty-something receptionist consider him past the rim of her eyeglasses, the eyepieces of which were secured around the back of her thin neck with a metal chain. Billy nodded to her once. "Just takin' a looksee at the artwork, ma'm." She raised one eyebrow before he turned back to the painting. The brass plate below said it was by a man named Frederick Church. *Twilight in the Wilderness*, it read. *Well I'll be*, Billy thought, *wonder if he's a local boy?* He leaned in a bit closer, tipping his head back to look through his bifocals in an effort to see if the painting could be real or a reproduction like the ones in his church office, printed on paper embossed with brushstrokes.

A loud cough from behind nearly made him leap out of his snakeskin boots. "Mr. Parrish will see you now." The receptionist stood by the door to the inner office, somehow stealing from her chair without so much as a squeak.

Billy felt like he had been caught standing next to a broken lamp. He kept his gaze down on the carpet and did not raise it as he took off his hat and walked past the woman through the now open doorway. "Thank ya', ma'am," he mumbled as he passed.

He was immediately accosted by the large hand of Gabriel Parrish, and Billy felt embarrassed for having entered the room in such a cowardly manner, his gaze averted to the floor. This was a man Billy needed to impress as a forceful, confident preacher. He grabbed the hand, a little too hard perhaps, and raised his eyes as quickly as possible, grinning broadly.