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PROUDLY PRESENTS

THE LAST PATRIOT

The next thrilling novel
by Brad Thor

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The Last Patriot . . .



PROLOGUE

JEFFERSON MEMORIAL
WASHINGTON, D.C.
SUNDAY EVENING

Andrew Salam stepped out from behind the bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson and asked, “Are you alone?”

Twenty-three-year-old Nura Khalifa nodded.

Her thick, dark hair spilled over her shoulders, stopping just above her breasts. Beneath her thin jacket, he could make out the curves of her body, the narrowness of her waist. For a moment, he believed he could even smell her perfume, though it was more likely the scent of cherry blossoms blown by a faint breeze across the tidal basin. He shouldn’t be meeting her at night and alone like this. It was a mistake.

Actually, the mistake was allowing his lust for her to cloud his judgment. Salam knew better. She was a gorgeous, desirable woman, but she was also his asset. He had recruited her and he was

responsible for the tenor of their relationship. No matter how perfect he thought they could be for each other, no matter how badly he wanted to feel, just once, her lips and that body pressed against his as he buried his nose in the nape of her neck and drank in the smell of her, he couldn't crumble. FBI agents controlled their emotions, not the other way around.

Shutting out his desire, Andrew Salam remained professional. "Why did you contact me?"

"Because I needed to see you," said Nura as she moved toward him.

He thought about holding out his hand to stop her. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself if she got any closer. Then he saw the tears that stained her face and, without thinking, opened up his arms.

Nura came to him and he pulled her into his chest. As she sobbed, his head fell to the crown of her head and he allowed his face to brush against her hair. He was playing with fire.

As quickly as he had allowed her to come to him, he knew it was wrong and he gently pushed her away until he was holding her by both shoulders at arm's length. "What happened?"

"My uncle's the target," she stammered.

Salam was stunned. "Are you sure?"

"I think they've already hired the assassin."

"Hold on, Nura. People just don't go out and hire assassins," began Salam, but she interrupted him.

"They said the threat has grown too great and it needs to be dealt with, now."

Salam bent down so he could look into her eyes. "Did they mention your uncle by name?"

"No, but they didn't have to. I *know* he's the target."

"How do you know?"

"They've been asking lots of questions about him and what he's working on. Andrew, we have to do something. We have to find him and warn him. *Please.*"

"We will," said Salam as he looked around. "I promise. But first, I need to know everything you've heard, no matter how small."

Nura was trembling.

"How did you get here?" he asked as he removed his coat and draped it over her shoulders.

"I took the Metro, why?"

Though the couple had the memorial all to themselves at this time of night, Salam was uncomfortable about being out in the open. He

had a strange feeling that they were being watched. "I'd feel better if we went someplace else. My car is parked nearby. Are you up to taking a walk?"

Nura nodded and Salam put his arm around her as they exited the statue chamber.

While they walked, Nura began to fill him in on what she had learned.

Salam listened, but his mind was drifting.

Had he been paying attention to more than just how good she felt pressed up against him, he might have had time to react to the two men who sprung from the shadows.

CHAPTER 1

ROME, ITALY
MONDAY EVENING

The Italian Centre for Photoreproduction, Binding, and Restoration of State Archives, also known as the CFLR, was located in an unassuming postmodern office building three blocks from the Tiber River at 14 Via Costanza Baudana Vaccolini. It boasted one of the world's leading archival preservation facilities as well as a young deputy assistant director named Alessandro Lombardi, who was eager to begin his evening.

"Dottore, mi scusi," said Lombardi.

Dr. Marwan Khalifa, a distinguished Koranic scholar in his early sixties with a handsome face and neatly trimmed beard, looked up from the desk he was working at. "Yes, Alessandro?"

The Italian adopted his most charming smile and asked, "Tonight, we finish early?"

Dr. Khalifa laughed and set down his pen. "You have *another* date this evening?"

Lombardi approached and showed the visiting scholar a picture on his mobile phone.

“What happened to the blond woman?”

Lombardi shrugged. “That was last week.”

Khalifa picked his pen back up. “I suppose I can be done in an hour.”

“An *hour*?” exclaimed Lombardi as he pressed his hands together in mock prayer. “Dottore, if I don’t leave now, all of the good tables outside will be gone. Please. When the weather is this nice, Italians are not allowed to work late. It’s state policy.”

Khalifa knew better. No matter what the weather, there were always people working late in the CFLR building—maybe not in the Research and Preservation department, but there was almost always a light burning somewhere. “If you want to leave your keys, I’ll lock up the office when I go.”

“And my time card?” asked Lombardi, pressing his luck.

“You get paid for the time you work, my friend.”

“*Va bene*,” replied the young man as he fished a set of keys for the department from his pocket and set them on the desk. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Have fun,” said Khalifa.

Lombardi flashed him the smile once more and then made his way toward the exit, turning off any unnecessary lights along his way.

Dr. Khalifa’s desk was a large drafting-style table, illuminated by two adjustable lamps. His time as well as Lombardi’s was being paid for by the Yemeni Antiquities Authority.

In 1972, workers in Yemen had made a startling discovery. Restoring the aging Great Mosque at Sana’a, said to have been one of the first architectural projects of Islam commissioned by the Prophet Mohammed himself, the workers uncovered a hidden loft between the mosque’s inner and outer roofs. Inside the loft was a mound of parchments and pages of Arabic texts that at some point had been secreted away, and were now melded together through centuries of exposure to rain and dampness. In archeological circles, such a discovery was referred to as a “paper grave.”

Cursory examinations suggested that what the grave contained were tens of thousands of fragments from at least a thousand early parchment codices of the Koran.

Access to the full breadth of the find had never been allowed. Bits and pieces had been

made available to a handful of scholars over the years, but out of respect for the sanctity of the documents, no one had ever been permitted to study the entire discovery. No one, that is, until Dr. Marwan Khalifa.

Khalifa was one of the world's preeminent Koranic scholars and had spent the majority of his professional career building relationships with the Yemeni Antiquities Authority and politely petitioning it to allow him to review the find. Finally, there was a changing of the guard and the new president of the Antiquities Authority, a significantly younger and more progressive man, invited Khalifa to study the entirety of what the workers at Sana'a had uncovered.

It didn't take long for Khalifa to realize the magnitude of the find.

As Yemen didn't have the proper facilities to preserve and study the fragments and as the Yemeni government was absolutely opposed to Khalifa's taking the items back to the United States, an arrangement was made for the complete contents of the grave to be transferred to the CFLR in Rome, where they could be preserved and studied before being returned to Yemen.

With the blessing of the new Antiquities Authority president, Khalifa oversaw the entire process, including the technical side, which included such things as edge detection, document degradation, global and adaptive thresholding, color clustering, and image processing.

His anticipation grew as each scrap was preserved and he was able to begin assembling the pieces of the puzzle. A significant percentage of the parchments dated back to the seventh and eighth centuries—Islam's first two centuries. Khalifa was handling pieces of the earliest Korans known to mankind.

A billion-and-a-half Muslims worldwide believed that the Koran they worshiped today was the perfect, inviolate word of God—an *exact* word-for-word, perfect copy of the original book as it exists in Paradise and just as it was transmitted, without a single error, by Allah to the Prophet Mohammed through the Angel Gabriel.

As a textual historian, Khalifa was fascinated by the inconsistencies. As a moderate Muslim who loved his religion, but believed deeply that it was in need of reform, he was overjoyed. The fact that he had found, and was continuing to

find, aberrations that differed from Islamic dogma meant that the case could finally be made for the Koran to be reexamined in a historical framework.

He had always believed that the Koran had been written by man, not God. If such a thing could be proven, Muslims around the world would be able to reexamine their faith with a modern, twenty-first-century perspective, rather than the outdated, unenlightened perspective of seventh-century Arabia. And now it seemed that he had just the proof he needed.

It was such a powerful discovery that Khalifa could barely sleep at night. It dovetailed so well with another project his colleague Anthony Nichols was working on back in America, that he felt as if Allah himself was steering his research, that this was His divine will.

All Khalifa could think about when he wasn't at work was getting back to the CFLR facility each day to further investigate the fragments.

Though on evenings like this Khalifa missed Lombardi's companionship as well as his expertise with the technical equipment, the truth was that he hardly noticed when the young Italian was gone. In fact, he was often so engrossed that he

barely noticed Lombardi even when he was standing at the desk right in front of him.

Turning to the voluminous collection of information he had stored on his rugged Tough-book laptop, Khalifa pulled up one of the thirty-two thousand images the CFLR had already digitally archived. While he could have crossed the room and retrieved the fragment itself, he often found it unnecessary, as accessing the digital images was much easier.

Khalifa was working on lining up six slivers of text written in the Hijazzi script, when a shadow fell across his drafting table. "What did you forget this time, Alessandro?" the scholar asked without looking up.

"I didn't forget anything," responded a deep, unfamiliar voice. "It is you who have forgotten."

Dr. Khalifa looked up and saw a man in a long, black soutane with a white collar. It was a common sight throughout Rome, particularly near the Vatican. But, even though the CFLR did do a certain amount of work with the Holy See, Khalifa had never seen a priest inside the building. "Who are you?"

"That's not important," replied the priest as he moved closer. "I would rather discuss your faith."

“You must be confused, Father,” said Khalifa as he sat up in his chair. “I’m not a Catholic. I’m Muslim.”

“I know,” said the priest softly. “That’s why I’m here.”

In an explosion of black cloth, the priest was suddenly behind Khalifa. One of his large, rough hands cupped the scholar’s chin while the other gripped the side of his head.

With a powerful snap, the priest broke the scholar’s neck.

He stood there for a moment, the corpse clutched tightly, almost lovingly to his chest, then stepped back and let go.

Khalifa’s head slammed against the table before coming to rest beneath it.

The priest dragged the body across the floor and positioned it at the bottom of a set of stairs which led up to a small archival library. From there, it took only moments to set the fire.

Two hours later, having showered and changed, the assassin sat in his hotel room and studied Khalifa’s laptop. Connecting to a remote server, he had the Koranic scholar’s password program cracked within fifteen minutes. From there, one

e-mail confirmed everything he needed to know.

Marwan,

Finally, good news! It appears we have located the book. A dealer named René Bertrand is bringing it to market in Paris at the Antiquarian Book Fair. I will be meeting him there to negotiate the purchase. As you know, my funding is limited, but I have faith that barring an all-out bidding war, the book will be ours!

As planned, I will see you next Monday at 9:00 a.m. in the Middle Eastern Reading Room of the Library of Congress—although now we'll have the book and can begin deciphering the location of the final revelation!

Anthony

The assassin had had Khalifa under surveillance long enough to know who the sender was and what he was referring to. It was a parallel and potentially more damaging project, which up

until this point had appeared stalled. Obviously, things had changed—and not for the better.

The assassin shut down the laptop and spent the next several hours pondering the implication of what he had learned. He then started formulating a plan. When all of the angles had been considered and tested in his mind, he reactivated the computer.

Attaching the relevant e-mails between Khalifa and Anthony Nichols, he composed his report and delivered his assessment to his superiors.

Their response came back twenty minutes later, hidden in the draft folder of the e-mail account they shared. The assassin had been cleared for the Paris operation.

At the end of the message, his superiors instructed that funds would be transferred to Paris and all necessary arrangements would be made. They then congratulated him on his success in Rome.

The assassin deleted the message from the draft folder and logged off. After reciting his prayers, he disconnected his phone and hung the Do Not Disturb sign on his door. He would be leaving early in the morning and needed to rest.

The next several days were going to be very busy. His superiors were in agreement that the Prophet Mohammed's lost revelation needed to stay lost—forever.

CHAPTER 2

PARIS, FRANCE
FRIDAY

Thirty-seven-year-old American Scot Harvath studied the amazing woman sitting at the café table next to him. Her blond hair had grown back and came to just below her ears.

“We need to make a decision,” she said.

There it was—the topic he’d been trying to avoid since killing the man who had shot her nine months ago.

“I just want to make sure that you’re fully—” he began, his voice trailing off.

“Recovered?” she asked, finishing his sentence for him.

Harvath nodded.

“Scot, this stopped being about my recovery the minute we left the United States. I’m fine. Not one hundred percent, but as close as I’m probably going to get.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

Tracy Hastings smiled. Prior to being targeted by an assassin bent on revenge against Harvath, Tracy had been a Naval Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician who had lost one of her luminescent, pale blue eyes when an IED she was defusing detonated prematurely. Though her face had undergone significant scarring, the plastic surgeons had done a remarkable job of minimizing the visible damage.

Hastings had always been in great shape, but after the accident she had thrown herself into her fitness routine. She had the most perfectly sculpted body of any woman Harvath had ever known. Self-conscious about her disfigurement and the pale blue eye given to her by her surgeons as a replacement, Tracy had been fond of joking that she had both a body to die for and the face to protect it.

It was a joke that Harvath had worked hard to wean from her repertoire. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and slowly his hard work had paid off. The closer they grew and the safer Tracy felt with him, the less her self-deprecating humor seemed necessary.

The same could be said for Harvath. Ten years Tracy's senior, he had used sarcasm largely to keep the world at bay. Now, he used it to make her laugh.

With his handsome, rugged face, sandy brown hair, bright blue eyes, and muscular five-foot-ten frame, they made a striking couple.

“You want to know what I think?” she asked. “I think this is more about your recovery than mine. And that’s okay.”

Harvath started to object, but Tracy put her hand atop his and said, “We need to put what happened behind us and get on with our lives.”

They had been together less than a year, but she knew him better than anyone ever had. She knew he’d never be happy living an ordinary life. So much of who he was and how he saw himself came from what he did. He needed to get back to it, even if that meant her nudging him toward it.

Harvath slid his hand out from under hers. He couldn’t put what had happened behind him. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t shake the picture of finding Tracy in a pool of blood with a bullet in the back of her head, or the memory of the president who had stood in his way while the person responsible continued to target those closest to Harvath. A couple of friends suggested that maybe he was suffering from PTSD, but in the words of an Army colonel he once cross-trained with, Harvath didn’t get PTSD, he *gave* it.

“We can’t be gypsies forever,” Tracy insisted.

“Our lives have been on hold long enough. We need to get back to the real world, and you need to think about going back to work.”

“There’s about as much chance of me going back to work for Jack Rutledge as there is of me going to work for a terrorist organization. I’m done,” he said.

A Navy SEAL who had joined the president’s Secret Service detail in an effort to help improve the White House’s ability to stave off and respond to terrorist attacks, Harvath had grown to become the president’s number one covert counterterrorism operative and was exceptional at what he did.

So exceptional, in fact, that the president had created a top-secret antiterrorism effort known as the Apex Project specifically for him. Its goal was to level the playing field with international terrorists who sought to strike Americans and American interests at home and abroad. That goal was achieved through one simple mandate—as long as the terrorists refused to play by any rules, Harvath wouldn’t be expected to either.

The Apex Project was buried in a little-known branch of DHS known as the Office of International Investigative Assistance, or OIIA for short. The OIIA’s overt mission was to assist foreign police, military, and intelligence agencies in

helping to prevent terrorist attacks. In that sense, Harvath's mission was in step with the official OIIA mandate. In reality, he was a very secretive dog of war enlisted post-9/11 to be unleashed by the president upon the enemies of the United States anywhere, anytime, with anything he needed to get the job done.

But that part of Harvath's life was over. It had taken him years to realize that his counterterrorism career was incompatible with what he really wanted—a family and someone to come home to; someone to share his life with.

Starting relationships had never been his problem. It was keeping them going that he never could get right. Tracy Hastings was the best thing to ever happen to him and he had no intention of letting her go. For the first time in he couldn't remember how long, Scot Harvath was truly happy.

“We don't have to go back right away,” said Tracy, interrupting his thoughts. “We can wait until November, after the elections. There'll be Christmas and then the inauguration in January. Unless the constitution has been rewritten and Rutledge is elected to a third term, you'll be dealing with a completely new president.”

Harvath was about to respond when he

looked out across the street and noticed a well-dressed Arab man remove a “Slim Jim” from beneath his blazer.

Popping the lock on a faded blue Peugeot, the man climbed in, shut the door and disappeared beneath the window line.

He didn’t know why, but something inside Harvath told him this was more than just a car theft.