



ATRIA BOOKS
PROUDLY PRESENTS

THE APOSTLE

The next thrilling novel
by Brad Thor



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CHAPTER 1

KANDAHAR PROVINCE



Dr. Julia Gallo sat on a dusty carpet and eyed the cracked mud bricks and exposed timbers of the tiny room. She didn't need to look at her interpreter to know that he was watching her. "Ask again," she said.



Sayed cleared his throat, but the question wouldn't come. They were in dangerous territory. It was bad enough that the young American doctor dragged him to the most godforsaken villages in the middle of nowhere, but now she was openly trying to get them killed. If the Taliban knew what she was doing, they'd *both* be dead.

The five-foot-six Afghan with deep brown eyes and black hair had a wife, three children, and not so insignificant extended family that relied on him and the living he made as an interpreter.

For the first time in his twenty-two-year-old life, Sayed had something very few Afghans ever possessed—hope; hope for himself, hope for his



family, and hope for the future of his county. And while what he did was dangerous, there was no need to make it any more so by taunting the specter of death. Dr. Gallo, on the other hand, seemed to have a remarkably different set of priorities.

At five foot ten, Julia was a tall woman by most standards, but by Afghan standards she was a giant. And although she kept her long red hair covered beneath an Afghan headscarf known as a hijab, she couldn't hide her remarkable green eyes and the fact that she was a very attractive woman. She was a graduate of the Obstetrics & Gynecology program at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago and ten years her translator's senior. And while she may have shared Sayed's vision for the future of Afghanistan, she had her own opinions of how best to bring it about.



In a country where most parents didn't name their children until their fifth birthday because infant mortality rates were so high, Dr. Gallo and others like her had made a huge difference. Infant mortality was down more than eighteen percent since the Taliban had been ousted. That meant forty to fifty thousand infants who would have died under the old regime were surviving. She should have been thrilled, but for some reason she wasn't. She was unhappy and that made her push harder to bring about change.

Gallo knew she wasn't just rocking the cultural boat on these visits out into the countryside, she was shooting holes in the stern and reloading, but

she didn't care. The Taliban were a bunch of vile, misogynistic bastards who could rot in hell as far as she was concerned.

"Ask her again," she demanded.

Sayed knew the answer and was certain Dr. Gallo did, too. It was embarrassing for the women to have to answer, yet she pressed her point anyway. It was the setup for a message she had taken to proselytizing on a regular basis. Gallo had become a zealot in her own right, no different from the Taliban, and as much as Sayed respected her, this was going to be their last trip out of Kabul together. He would respectfully ask their NGO, CARE International, not to assign him to her anymore. No matter how nice she had been, it didn't mean he had to die because of her.

Dr. Gallo had always been complicated. She never spoke about her family or personal life, no matter how many hours they spent driving together nor how many opportunities Sayed offered her. She either turned the conversation back to him, asking questions she already knew the answers to, or she simply sat in the passenger seat staring out the window. Sayed had given up trying to connect with her and now was done trying to understand her.

Two pairs of eyes lowered toward the floor as Sayed capitulated and asked the woman Dr. Gallo's question once more. A long silence followed. The translator was tempted to fill the uncomfortable void, but Gallo held up her hand to quiet him.

Finally, the elder of the two women responded in Pashtu.

Julia listened, and when they were finished, Sayed translated.

“They traded the girl to pay off her father’s debt,” he said.

“Like some sort of farm animal,” Gallo replied. “Tell them they don’t have to live like this. I don’t care what kind of arrangement the men of this village have with the Taliban, women have rights, *even* in Afghanistan. But unless they know their rights, they can’t begin to exercise them. The first step is for them to get educated. There is a school less than five kilometers from here. Why aren’t they going to it?”

Sayed shook his head. “You know why.”

Julia fixed him with her intense green eyes. “Because it’s dangerous?”

The interpreter didn’t reply.

“More dangerous than being beaten by your husband or sold off because your father’s opium fields failed to produce?” Julia waited for an answer, and when none was offered, she stated, “We need to explain to them that they have options.”

“You say this even though the Taliban ride by on motorbikes and spray children and teachers who dare go to school with acid. It is easy for you to demand that these women exercise their ‘rights,’ as you say. But I’m sorry, Dr. Gallo,” said Sayed as he stood, “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Can’t do what?”

The young man didn’t have the energy to ex-

plain. He had told Dr. Gallo repeatedly that what she was doing was dangerous for both of them.

“I’ll wait for you outside at the car.” Turning, he exited the room and closed the door quietly behind him.

Julia felt a stab of regret. Sayed was the best interpreter she had ever worked with. He had also become her friend. They had spent countless hours together in some of the wildest, most remote regions of the country. She had learned that she could trust him and he was invaluable to her. She had contributed money out of her own pocket to make sure he was paid better than any of the other translators CARE used, and she had also spearheaded the effort to get the organization to pay to send him to medical school. He couldn’t leave her. Not now. She wouldn’t let him. They had a long drive back to Kabul. She would talk to him. She’d promise to relax her rhetoric a bit.

Shifting her attention back to her patients, Julia employed her limited Pashtu medical vocabulary and completed the exam.

CHAPTER 2

Twenty minutes later, with the sun beginning to sink low in the sky, Dr. Gallo exited the walled compound with her olive drab medical bag slung over her shoulder and her hijab tightly wrapped around her head. Afghan men, many with AK-47s propped nearby, squatted in a circle chatting. They fell silent and stared at the American woman as she walked by.

Julia found Sayed leaning against the hood of their faded Nissan Patrol smoking a cigarette. “Ready to go?” she asked.

Sayed nodded as Julia opened the rear passenger door, tossed her bag onto the backseat, and then climbed in front.

Taking one last drag, Sayed tamped out his cigarette on the bumper and slid the remainder into the pack for later.

It took several slams before the latch caught and his door would stay shut. After starting the engine,

the translator ground the vehicle into first gear and pulled out.

Julia tried to read his face as he picked his way down the dusty road from the village. If Sayed felt any anger toward her, he didn't show it.

As she tried to come up with the right words to say, he beat her to the punch. "I'm going to ask to be reassigned."

Julia didn't know how to reply. After everything she had done for him, she felt somewhat betrayed. But she knew she was being selfish. She had met his wife and his children. She understood. She had been putting him at greater and greater risk. She realized that. In all fairness, it actually said a lot about their friendship that he had kept going into the countryside with her for as long as he had.

With no words that seemed to suit the moment, she said what was in her heart. "Thank you."

Sayed smiled again. "I will pray for you, Dr. Gallo, and for your work."

The redheaded American was about to respond when they came around a bend and she noticed three green Afghan National Army pickup trucks blocking the road ahead.

"Roadblock," said Sayed.

Julia retrieved her bag from the backseat with her ID. "Why would they have a roadblock out here? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"I don't know," he replied, eyeing the soldiers manning the 7.62-caliber machine guns mounted atop the vehicles' roll bars. "We'll have to stop."

Julia nodded. Running the roadblock was out of the question. ANA soldiers were poorly disciplined and would open fire with the slightest provocation—stopping only when they had exhausted their ammo.

“Don’t worry,” he said as he rolled down his window. “I’m sure it’s just routine.”

Julia looked at the soldiers. They seemed keyed up, tense. “Keep the car running,” she said quietly.

The interpreter nodded and fished his ID out of his pocket. As their vehicle slowed to a stop, they were surrounded by the heavily armed soldiers.

Sayed placed his hand over his heart, nodded, and bade the men, “*Salaam alaikum.*”

No one returned the greeting.

A captain appeared at Sayed’s window and snapped his fingers for his ID. The young Afghan complied and handed over his papers.

Without even looking at the documents, the captain ordered him out of the SUV. Julia put her hand upon his arm. *Something definitely wasn’t right.*

Sayed smiled at her and gently pulled his arm away. When he had trouble opening his door, the captain got angry and wrenched it open from the outside.

Sayed tried to explain that the door was unreliable, but the captain wasn’t listening. He grabbed the young man by the back of the neck and threw him to the ground.

Inside the truck, Julia gasped and covered her mouth. *What was going on?*

Sayed tried to rise to his feet, but the captain

kicked him in the ribs. Wheezing, the young Afghan fell back to the ground.

Julia had seen enough. She began to open her door, but it was kicked shut by one of the soldiers who then seated his rifle in his shoulder and pointed the muzzle right at her head.

Gallo turned her attention back to Sayed. She could see him through the open driver's side door, lying on the ground with his arms wrapped around his sides.

He tried to speak, but the captain ignored him and brought his boot back for another kick. This one landed under the interpreter's chin and snapped his head backward.

Julia screamed as Sayed fell unconscious and a stream of blood began to trickle from his mouth.

The captain barked orders at the soldiers and Julia knew it was about to be her turn. With her elbow, she drove the door lock home and then leapt for the driver's seat.

One of the soldiers near the captain saw what she was doing and rushed to stop her. But instead of shooting her, he reached inside the vehicle and grabbed ahold of her clothing.

Julia had removed a scalpel from her bag and slashed at him wildly. The man roared in pain and fell backward.

With his hold broken, Julia forced the car into gear, revved the engine, and released the brake.

Immediately, there was a deafening chorus of gunfire as the Nissan's tires were flattened and the chassis dropped onto the rims. Now Julia was in real trouble.



She let go of the scalpel and held up both of her hands. With two soldiers covering him, the captain extricated her from the vehicle and slammed her up against its side.

She saw a flash of skin as the back of his hand came forward and cracked into the bone of her cheek just beneath her left eye.

The force of the blow caused Julia's vision to dim. Her knees shook and she felt she was about to lose consciousness herself.

The captain stepped away while his men pinned her against the SUV.

As Julia's senses returned, she had the distinct impression that they were about to do something very bad. She felt certain that she was going to be raped and she prepared herself. But these men had something much worse in mind.



The captain squatted down and began slapping Sayed's face to bring him around. It took several minutes to revive him, but when he finally came to, the captain called over additional men to pick him up. They held him until the young Afghan could stand on his own and then they stepped away.

Without saying a word, the captain drew his pistol from his holster and Julia's stomach dropped. She opened her mouth to plead for her friend's life, but as she did, a soldier drove his fist into her midsection and knocked the wind from her body.

As she gasped for air, she saw the captain place his weapon against the side of Sayed's head and watched in horror as he pulled the trigger.



CHAPTER 3

MCLEAN, VIRGINIA

TWO DAYS LATER



The bright spring day stood in sharp contrast to the new president's mood. Robert Alden had suggested a walk outside as a way to allow things to cool down between himself and the woman he was with. So far, it wasn't working.

"You and I both know," said the president's guest, "that the CIA is so risk averse that even if you showed them where their asses were, they'd be afraid to grab on with both hands."

Stephanie Gallo was arguably one of the biggest reasons forty-eight-year-old Robert Alden now occupied the highest office in the world. Gallo had not only helped orchestrate the Alden campaign for president, and been one of its biggest donors and best fund-raisers, she had delivered the mainstream media for him on a silver platter.

She was an entertainment titan who, upon the death of her husband in the early 1970s, had spun a "midmarket newspaper and two shitty AM radio



stations” into a series of conglomerates that owned newspapers, movie studios, and television stations around the world. She was the person who had convinced Alden not only to run for president, but that he would win.

Would. It was an interesting choice of words. She had not said *could* win, but *would* win. She was that confident. And she was right. The election had been a blowout. Alden’s mild-mannered opponent never stood a chance.

To secure this incredible win, Gallo had insisted that her media strategy be at the very center of the campaign. It was the hub that everything else radiated out from. They had worked tirelessly and it had paid off with overwhelming dividends. Alden owed Gallo a tremendous debt, which made the discussion they were having that much more difficult.

“If we can’t remain calm about this, Stephanie, there’s no way we’ll be able to think clearly.”

“*Remain calm?*” Gallo shot back. “How calm would *you* be if it was your daughter those animals had kidnapped?”

If Robert Alden hadn’t already been married, he and Stephanie Gallo would have made a stunning couple. The new president was athletic and handsome. He stood six foot two with dark hair, hazel eyes, and had a magnetic personality that drew people instantly to him.

At fifty-five, Stephanie Gallo was seven years his senior, but didn’t look a day over forty. She was an

incredibly attractive woman with auburn hair, blue eyes, and a large, sumptuous mouth. She was tall, five foot ten when not in heels, and had a very alluring physique.

An international celebrity in her own right, Gallo competed successfully in a largely male world and made no apologies for doing it as a woman. Women around the world adored her not only for her sense of style, which retained just a hint of sex appeal, but also for her frank belief that God had blessed women with curves and that any woman who tried to exercise her body into a replica of a teenage boy's was a fool.

But despite everything she had going for her, all of the notoriety, money, and power, right now she needed a man: this man. Only Robert Alden could effect her daughter's release and Stephanie Gallo was determined to make that happen—no matter what it took.

Alden put his hand on her shoulder. "I understand how you must feel."

Gallo didn't like being patronized. "Really? Then why aren't you doing anything? We own that fucking country, for God's sake. Agree to the terms!"

And here they were again, back at the beginning of the argument. Alden tried to explain his position once more. "Stephanie, I agree with the CIA's assessment. These people kidnapped Julia for this specific reason. They knew you would come to me and ask me to lean on the Afghans.

“This terrorist they have imprisoned in Kabul, the one they want to trade for Julia, is an al-Qaeda operative—a very bad one. Do you know how many high-level Afghan government officials he has helped kill? For the Afghans, this is like capturing Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinckley, and John Wilkes Booth all at once.

“We can’t say that we want Afghanistan to obey the rule of law only when it serves our interests. Besides, I ran on a platform of being tough on terrorists and not repeating any of the mistakes of my predecessors.”

“Screw your platform and screw your predecessors,” snapped Gallo. “We’re talking about Julia’s life, for Christ’s sake.”

“I’m sorry, Stephanie. I—”

“What do you mean, you’re *sorry*? Are you telling me that we can’t convince the Afghans to give us Khan for twenty-four hours, forty-eight tops, so that we can get my daughter back?”

“And if we lose him?” asked Alden.

“Then flood the skies with predators and retask all of our satellites over Afghanistan. I don’t care. I just want her back.”

“I know you do. I do, too. I also care about what happens in Afghanistan. You’ve got to know that this is not easy for me.”

Gallo scowled at the president. “This is your first chance to really exercise your power and you’re afraid to use it. That’s what I think.”

Alden could feel his blood pressure rising and

he fought to keep it under control. “I warned you both about this. Julia knew the risks when she took that job over there.”

“That doesn’t change anything.”

“Stephanie, I’ve explained to you how this works. The Afghans take the lead in kidnapping investigations within their own country—even those of American citizens. The CIA, everyone at our embassy in Kabul, and our entire military apparatus in theater are doing everything they can to get Julia back.”

“Except giving her kidnappers the one thing they’ve asked for.”

Alden shook his head sadly.

“You’re the president of the United States. You’re telling me you can’t tell the Afghans that Mustafa Khan is part of a larger investigation we are running and that we need to interrogate him in our own facility at Bagram? Once we trade him for Julia and get her back, we can hunt him down ourselves. If the Afghans caught Khan once, we should be able to catch him a second time with no problem.”

“First of all, the Afghans got lucky because someone tipped them off as to his whereabouts. Secondly, what you’re asking me to do is dishonest and that’s not how I operate.”

Gallo stared at Alden and let the president’s claim hover between them like a lit stick of dynamite.

It didn’t take Alden long to get uncomfortable. His guest didn’t have to say a word. He knew what she was thinking. “Listen, Stephanie, we’re going to get Julia back. I promise.”

“I’m sorry, but your promise is not good enough. You need to start doing more. *A lot* more.”

“Or what?”

Gallo’s eyes bore right into Alden’s. “Or your presidency is going to be one of the shortest in U.S. history.”

“Are you threatening me?” he asked.

“You’re damn right I’m threatening you. We’ve lost two days. It’s time for you to get my daughter back.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then,” said Gallo, choosing her next words very carefully, “the entire world is going to find out very fast that the new president of the United States participated in a cover-up that involved the deaths of four innocent people.”

Fifteen yards away, in the thick blanket of trees that bordered Stephanie Gallo’s equestrian estate, a young Secret Service agent froze dead in her tracks.