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PATH OF THE ASSASSIN

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Turn the page for a preview of
Path of the Assassin. . . .

Dressed in the traditional robes of a Muslim pilgrim, a lone figure tore back the carpeting from beneath a window of the sumptuously appointed room and nailed the feet of a tripod firmly into the concrete floor with a commercial-grade bolt gun. The equipment had been smuggled into Saudi Arabia's Dar Al Taqwa Inter-Continental Hotel via several large suitcases and a hard-shell golf club case. Arabs, even in Medina, loved their golf, after all, and no one had given any of the cases a second look.

Finally assembled and secured to its launching platform, the second generation TOW2 Short missile was something to behold. Though it retained the same 3-foot-10-inch profile of the ones Israel had used during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the effective range of the weapon had increased by almost a thousand yards and now could cover the length of forty-one football fields—more than enough to deliver today's deadly payload.

The missile's optical sighting unit was securely positioned in the adjoining hotel room and its crosshairs were fixed upon its target. An infrared sensor would track the weapon's trajectory and progress, relaying any last-minute adjustments. At such close range, though, there'd be no need for adjustments. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

The digital fuse was set for ten minutes into the night prayer session of the Prophet's Mosque, the second holiest shrine in Islam. Friday was the most important day of worship in the Muslim faith, and the evening prayer sessions were always the most heavily attended. The timing of the attack

insured maximum carnage. With a Do Not Disturb sign hung on the doors of both rooms, the terrorist would be resting comfortably on a first-class flight to Cairo by the time the missile launched. From Cairo, a clandestine transport network would round out the journey home.

As the digital fuse began its devastating countdown, the terrorist spray-painted a large hand cradling the Star of David on the wall.

For a moment, scenes of a happier time flashed through the terrorist's mind. A time before the hatred was so deeply entrenched. Two young lovers from different walks of life, two different sides of the struggle, walked together along a river in fall. Bells rang in the distance and they cherished the good fortune that had brought them together. Though each had been raised to hate the other, love had blossomed between them. But there were influences at work greater than their love. It was those influences that would change their lives, and the world, forever.

The terrorist's eyes, normally silver in color, now flashed coal black with hate as the final letters were painted beneath the hand. It was a simple yet chilling three-letter message: "TERROR FOR TERROR."

Two hours later, a stream of worshippers hurried themselves along, late for the sunset prayer. As they entered the Prophet's Mosque, right leg first as custom dictated, each supplicated and said, "I seek refuge with the Mighty Allah. I seek protection in His Generous Countenance and His Everlasting Authority. O Allah! Forgive my sins, and open the gates of Your mercy to me."

They fanned out deeper into the mosque, searching for empty spaces to kneel among the other thousands of worshippers. As was the custom, the women were directed into a separate area closed off by large panels of fabric, so as not to distract the men from their prayers. The younger chil-

dren stayed with their mothers while older sons, well behaved enough not to disrupt the service, were allowed to sit amongst the rows of adult men. Most families in the Prophet's Mosque were divided this way, when a great rumbling erupted overhead and a massive double-detonating warhead crashed through the roof, exploding in a fiery hail of instant death.

By noon the next day, rescue workers were giving up any hope of finding victims alive beneath the wreckage of the Prophet's Mosque. As throngs of Medina's citizens gathered behind Emergency Services barricades asking *why*, a broadcast fax went simultaneously to newspapers and news agencies around the globe. It read:

For decades, the Arab world has supported and encouraged terrorism against Israel. Publicly, terrorists are denounced, while privately they continue to be trained and financed by Arab Nations. The Nation of Israel will no longer tolerate acts of violence upon our soil, or against our people. Henceforward we will speak to the Arab world in the language they have given birth to, the language they have spat bitterly into our mouths, the only language they understand—the language of terrorism.

As it says in Job—They that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, shall reap the same.

The fax was signed on behalf of an organization calling itself the Hand of God. Beneath the group's name was the same pictogram the Medina police found on the wall of Room 611 of the Dar Al Taqwa Inter-Continental Hotel, a large hand holding the Star of David in its palm.

The operation had begun.

Sixty kilometers across the water west of Hong Kong, the rain beat like sheets of nails against the floating Macau Palace Casino, affectionately known by locals as the Boat of Thieves. The seedy casino was really just an old double-decker ferry, straining now against its moorings in the ever-increasing turbulence of the waters off the South China Sea.

The Macanese waitress smiled as she handed a bottle of beer to her handsome customer. At a trim but muscular five feet ten, with brown hair and blue eyes, Scot Harvath was used to attention. As the waitress moved on to the next customer, the casino's public address system crackled to life. First in Chinese, then Portuguese, and finally in English a voice announced that the Macau Observatory had elevated *tropical depression* Anita to *tropical storm* Anita. The nearby Guia Lighthouse was flying the "Number 8" signal, indicating that gale-force winds were expected. Patrons were advised that local authorities might close the islands' bridges, as well as the connecting arteries with mainland China, without further notice.

There was little question as to "if" the storm was going to get worse. It was just a matter of when. *We'd better wrap this up soon*, Harvath thought. The last report he had received from the U.S. Naval Meteorological Center forecasted that the depression would soon advance to the Tropical Storm stage with winds blowing upwards of seventy-two miles per hour. Anything stronger than that would amount to a full-blown typhoon and he knew at that point the mission

would be scrapped. Scrapping, though, was unacceptable to Harvath. He had come too far to let his target go now.

Harvath pulled fifty more Hong Kong Dollars from his pocket and placed another bet as he pretended to sip at his cold beer. He was sitting at a table with a mixed group of Anglos and Asians, all hardcore gamblers, none of whom had the good sense to make tracks before the storm got any worse. Next to him was Sammy Cheng of the SDU, the Hong Police Department's secretive counterterrorism detachment. Harvath and Cheng had met several years prior when Harvath's SEAL team had been sent to Hong Kong to help the then British counterterrorism unit improve upon their water skills.

Though both men appeared to be engrossed in the game, their attention was glued to a Chinese man three tables away.

The man's name was William Lee and he was one of the SDU's top undercover operatives. Tonight he was posing as an intermediary for an outlawed Chinese extremist organization looking to acquire weapons and explosives. The target of the operation was an arms dealer named Philip Jamek.

Extremist groups were Jamek's best customers. He was credited with sales throughout the Philippines, Indonesia, and Japan, and was now making his services, which also included training in the arts of terrorism and assassination, available in China. The Chinese government wanted Jamek taken out of circulation once and for all and so too did Scot Harvath.

Harvath had spent months tracking down this last member of the Swiss mercenary team known as the Lions of Lucerne, who had kidnapped the American president the year before and left a trail of dead Americans in their wake. The American government believed that all of the deadly Lions had been eliminated or taken into custody, but Harvath had discovered one who had slipped through the cracks—Philip Jamek. Not only was Jamek a proven danger to society, but Harvath had made a vow to his fallen comrades

that he wouldn't rest until every last person responsible for their deaths was brought to justice.

Harvath and Sammy Cheng watched as a waitress approached Lee and set a drink down on the table in front of him. She said a few words and he reached into his pocket to retrieve a tip. When the waitress left, Lee played with his chips for a few moments and then pretended to cough into his hand as he relayed instructions over the tiny microphone sewn into his sleeve.

"Jamek just made contact," Sammy Cheng whispered to Harvath as he picked up the information over his earpiece.

Scot kept his eyes on the table. "The waitress who brought him the drink," he said. "He must be close."

"Close, or he gave the waitress the message and told her to wait ten minutes before delivering it."

"No, he's definitely nearby. He's going to watch to make sure Lee's alone."

"He won't be standing outside in this weather. Either he's got a car waiting or he's already caught one of the last taxis to the Hotel Lisboa."

"The Hotel Lisboa? He's moving the meet again?" asked Harvath.

Cheng nodded his head. Jamek had already switched the agreed-to meeting place several times that day, making it nearly impossible for a trap to be set. Harvath felt like he was on a whirlwind tour of the region. They had already ridden the Star Ferry from Hong Kong to Kowloon and back, had suffered two hours of rain in Hong Kong's Wanchai District, had gone up and down the Peak Tram, and had arrived at Hong Kong's Jetfoil terminal just in time to catch the last high-speed boat to Macau.

Moving the game over to Macau was an additionally ingenious twist as it technically took Hong Kong law enforcement officers, which the SDU were, out of their jurisdiction. As crafty as this move was, Cheng had seen it coming

and had gotten permission for his team to pursue Jamek into Macau. The only problem was that the rest of the team, following behind in two nondescript vans, were dressed in full tactical gear. They had had no time to change into plainclothes before the last Jetfoil departed, and had to be left behind.

As Lee got up from his table and made his way toward the cashier's cage with his chips, Harvath reflected on how masterfully Jamek had managed to whittle their team of over fifteen operatives down to only three. In addition to the storm, something else was brewing and Harvath had a bad feeling about how it was going to play out.

President Jack Rutledge's National Security Council was waiting for him with a mixture of cautious apprehension and professional unease when he entered the secure conference room beneath the White House known as the Situation Room. Being called in at such an ungodly hour and on a weekend had everyone on edge.

"Please be seated," said the president as he took his place at the head of the long cherrywood table. "Thank you for coming in so early and on a Saturday."

"As you all know, the fallout from the terrorist attack on the Prophet's Mosque in Medina has been every bit as bad as we feared it would be. The Israelis are experiencing a surge in homicide bombings and imams and mullahs throughout the Islamic world are encouraging additional retaliation. And, just as we had anticipated, the rhetoric has been ratcheted up by Muslim extremists who are now calling for attacks on the United States because of our support for Israel.

"To make matters worse, the Israelis are reacting to the latest attacks on their people by going after the Palestinians with a tremendous amount of force. That force is making life extremely difficult for the chief Palestinian negotiator, Ali Hasan, whom we all have seen is quickly becoming one of the key players in the peace process and somebody who will be very involved in the future of Palestine. While Hasan's people, and much of the Arab world, are yelling for blood, he is one of the few voices calling for a peaceful resolution.

"As for the Hand of God organization, Israel claims to be investigating, but says it has no knowledge of any such group,

and contrary to reports in the Arab press, is in no way supporting it. We have some reservations as to how forthcoming the Israelis are being with us, and with that said, I'd like to invite CIA Director Vaile to present his report."

"Thank you, Mr. President," said Vaile as his assistant passed folders to each attendee around the long table. "As you all know, the CIA has been actively investigating the terrorist attack in Medina over the last week. In particular, we have been interested in uncovering the identity of a heretofore-unknown terrorist group calling itself the Hand of God. We have confirmed that the missile used in the attack was indeed an Israeli-manufactured TOW2 Short. In addition to the president's report of the growing unrest in the Islamic world since the attack, the CIA feels it important to point out the surging popularity of the Hand of God throughout Israel. There appears to be an increased vigilante fervor among the Israeli public that their government is doing very little to put down. In fact, while most Israeli officials have halfheartedly condemned the attack in public, privately they're praising it, which has caught the interest of our analysts over the last week."

"Are you suggesting the Israeli government was actually involved with the attack on Medina?" asked Homeland Security Director Alan Driehaus.

"We have no concrete proof of that, but—"

"Well, what do you have?" asked Jennifer Staley, the secretary of state, as she leafed through the folder that had been handed her.

"After the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, acting Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, along with several high-ranking Israeli officials, intended to send a message not only to those involved in the Munich massacre, but also to anyone contemplating future attacks on Israel that such behavior would be met with deadly reprisals.

"To send the message, a covert action team from the

Mossad's assassination unit was assembled. There were to be no arrests, no trials, no appeals. Their goal was simple—kill every single person they could get to, whether their involvement in Munich was direct or indirect, and let the rest live in fear, never knowing when their time would come. And it didn't matter where the terrorists were hiding. The team was authorized to hunt them down anywhere in the world."

"I remember that," said the secretary of state. "What did the Israelis name their group?"

"The Wrath of God," said Vaile. All of the attendees who had been perusing the folders in front of them now raised their eyes and locked them on the CIA director.

Homeland Security Director Driehaus moved uncomfortably in his chair for a moment before speaking. "Are you telling us you believe the Israelis have reactivated this unit to terrorize the Arab world?"

"We don't know yet, but we're putting a lot of resources into getting to the bottom of it. When it comes to covert operations, the Israelis are one of the best. If they don't want anybody to know they're behind something, most of the time they can make that happen."

"What diplomatic channels have we tried?" asked the secretary of state.

Vaile glanced at President Rutledge before responding. "The president has put the question pointblank to the Israeli prime minister, and he has denied that his country has any involvement with the Hand of God."

"So what in fact do we know?" asked the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

"What we know is that the timing of this couldn't be worse. If you'll permit me, I'd like to explain why the president has called this meeting," said Vaile, who then asked for the lights to be lowered as he activated his laptop. Two large, flat panel screens at the front of the Situation Room came to

life with the seal of the Central Intelligence Agency as the director began his presentation.

“Before Osama bin Laden appeared on the world stage, the spotlight rested largely upon Abu Nidal, a man who not only wrote the book on international terrorism but published it as well.

“The Abu Nidal Organization, also known as the Fatah Revolutionary Council, has carried out over ninety terrorist attacks across twenty countries, resulting in the death and injury of more than a thousand people. At one point, the State Department classified Nidal and his people as the most dangerous terrorist organization in the world. His targets have included the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Israel, moderate Palestinians, the PLO, and various Arab nations. The organization’s number one priority after the creation of a Palestinian State is the destruction of Israel and then America—”

“Wait a second. These people have been off the radar screen for years,” said the secretary of state. “I thought we were operating under the assumption that Abu Nidal had been assassinated in Baghdad.”

“The CIA is inclined to agree with you,” responded Vaile.

“Then what are we talking about?”

“This,” said Vaile as he advanced to the next slide of his presentation. The long list of Abu Nidal’s terrorist activities, including masterminding the Rome and Vienna airport massacres, as well as the Pan Am 103 bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, disappeared and was replaced by an empty silhouette. “Ladies and gentlemen, meet Hashim Nidal. Abu Nidal’s son.”

“But there’s nothing there,” replied the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

“And therein lies the greatest threat facing our country at this moment,” replied Vaile.

“Director Vaile,” began the Homeland Security Director,

“are you telling us that despite the vast resources of the CIA, you don’t even have a picture of this man?”

“Unfortunately, that’s correct. Abu Nidal went to great lengths to keep the fact that he even had a son hidden. All we’ve been able to ascertain thus far is his name. Roughly translated from Arabic, Hashim means “crusher of evil.”

“Well, that’s lovely,” said the secretary of state as she closed her folder and pushed it away from her. “Are you suggesting, Mr. Vaile, that Abu Nidal turned the reins of the organization over to his son?”

“Based on the intelligence we have received, that’s exactly what we’re suggesting.”

“And what is this intelligence?”

“According to our sources, Hashim Nidal has united an international network of Islamic terrorist organizations, including Hamas, Hezbollah, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the remnants of Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines . . . The list goes on and on. He has been able to convince them that their service to Allah can best be carried out by joining forces. He knows their strengths, as well as their weaknesses. They have been sharing strategies, intelligence, and even training. There’s a deep religious underpinning within all the groups, which Hashim Nidal is using to supersede their political beliefs. For all intents and purposes, he has united them behind a common cause—the destruction of Israel.

“And the threat to the United States is . . . ?” asked Driehaus.

“Extremely serious. According to their doctrine, the destruction of Israel will be immediately followed by the destruction of the United States.”

“What’s pushed this all to center stage?” asked the secretary of state.

“There’s been a conflux of events—increased telephone chatter picked up by the NSA, FBI probes into suspected

sleeper cells here in the U.S., and a significant breakthrough by the CIA,” said Vaile with full knowledge that his agency needed to appear two steps ahead of terrorism for once instead of two steps behind.

“What exactly is this *significant* CIA breakthrough?” asked Driehaus.

“With the help of the NSA, we’ve been monitoring communications among several of the most serious Islamic terrorist groups. Someone codenamed Ghazi, which is Arabic for ‘the conqueror,’ has been repeatedly referenced as the great father of the organizations. Ghazi has also been discussed as masterminding an upcoming event that will begin the shift of world power to the true believers of Islam.

“Now, last night, a senior member of the Islamic Jihad was picked up in Beirut. Under interrogation, he identified Hashim Nidal as the person referred to as Ghazi, but said he’d never met him in person and couldn’t provide a description of him. He indicated that Nidal’s upcoming event was imminent and would unite the Arab world once and for all in decimating Israel, followed by the United States.”

Even the most seasoned poker faces around the Situation Room table couldn’t mask their shock and disbelief.

“Does the CIA actually believe this Hashim Nidal has the wherewithal to pull this off?” asked the chairman of the Joint Chiefs.