

PROLOGUE

Southern France - Twenty Years Ago

Fahim Bajwah stood in the doorway and took one final look at his dormitory room at Avignon's elite international prep school, *École Internationale D'Avignon*. He had stripped his bed down to the mattress ticking, emptied his desk, and shipped his belongings to Paris.

"What will you do here all by yourself?" he asked his roommate, Ricardo, an Italian student a year his junior lazing on the other twin bed.

The Italian propped himself on an elbow and responded in English, as was customary at *École*. "I suppose I'll be at the top of the class," he replied. "For once."

Pleased with that remark—because it was probably true—Fahim grinned. "My parting gift to you, my friend."

Fahim appeared older than he was, handsome for a seventeen-year-old boy, with long black eyelashes and olive skin. His mother was the daughter of Turkish immigrants—she was also an addict and a prostitute, something Fahim hid from his fellow students.

As cover, he told anyone who asked that his father was a Saudi oil tycoon—an unverifiable story since Fahim had never met the man and genuinely didn't know. He deepened the lie by saying his mother was a devout Muslim and refused to leave the Arab kingdom.

While neither of those things was true, his biological parents had bestowed upon him his good looks and penetrating intelligence. The father he'd never met—whom he assumed to be a rich Gulf Arab who'd frequented his mother while in Marseille on business—covered Fahim's tuition, room, and board through a blind trust in a Swiss bank account.

"Don't forget," Ricardo added, swiveling to sit on the bed's edge, his red-stripped Gucci luggage nearby since he, too, would leave in a few days. "You promised two weekends in Paris."

"Did I?"

“Mes oui, mon ami! I expect you to dazzle the ladies up there at the Sorbonne. Paris women should be easy prey for a rich Arab like you. And think of the American tourist girls.”

Growing up in a tenement in Marseille, Fahim had honed his natural charisma to get what he wanted. That often included the seduction of older women. Having secured a spot at Sorbonne University’s College of Engineering, his friends had high expectations for his upcoming romantic adventures.

Fahim extended his hand. “Give me six months to get established. By then, I plan to be dating an heiress.”

“In six months, I expect you to be halfway to your baccalaureate.”

The graduate’s grin faded. “As do I.”

“Au revoir, mon ami. Bon chance.”

Fahim hurried through the corridors, saying goodbye to faculty and students. Once outside, he rushed down the stone steps to the parking lot, where he kept his secondhand Honda motorcycle.

His financial trust had its limits. His father, whoever he was, had set it up to pay for education-related expenses only, a rule administered anonymously by a faceless functionary at a Zurich bank. But being a clever boy, when Fahim was thirteen, he set up a basic e-commerce spoof of *Ecole’s* bookstore. The banker who doled out his trust fund never realized that *Ecole’s* tuition included the textbooks. Money for books Fahim already owned went straight into his bank account, allowing him to amass enough for the bike.

He fired the engine with a kick and turned south, pleased to feel the hot wind on his arms. The Mullah Fawwah had demanded Fahim come to the Marseille mosque to say goodbye to his half-brother, Rafa. The mullah also said he needed to speak urgently with Fahim.

Though Fahim suspected it had something to do with a graduation gift, he didn’t want to go. He’d never been comfortable with the stern conventions of Islam and studiously avoided the mullah’s mosque. But the mullah had insisted.

His route took him along the Rhone River, following it to the northeast before he would turn on the highway. As he roared by Avignon's stately castles, he spotted the sign for the bridge. On impulse, he leaned the bike into a turn.

Although Fahim considered himself an orphan, one of his earliest memories was of his mother, Claudette, singing to him and Rafa, who was three years younger. Claudette's only song was the nursery rhyme "*On the Bridge of Avignon*," which she sang when they were alone, a rare occurrence. Fahim had learned to care for his brother, as their mother often left them alone for hours in a tenement high-rise in Marseille's crime-ridden Third Arrondissement.

The French child welfare department took the boys away from Claudette when Fahim was nine and Rafa was six. Despite her failings, Claudette's voice remained buried in Fahim's mind, to the extent that he often found himself at the Saint-Bénézet Bridge throughout his years at the boarding school.

Better known as the Bridge of Avignon, it was completed in 1185. In the thirteenth century, it served as a link for Catholic pilgrimage and a stronghold of the Avignon papacy, playing a significant role in the history of Western civilization. Although only four of its original twenty-two stone arches remained anchored in the Rhône, it was designated a World Heritage Site, one of the most popular tourist attractions in Provence.

Parking was easy with the motorcycle. Fahim removed his helmet, leaned the bike on its kickstand, and purchased a ticket to walk to the end of the bridge in the middle of the river. With Claudette's voice haunting him, he wandered among the tourists, passed the Philippe Bell Tower, and strolled to the broken edge of the remaining span. He disregarded the foreigners, concentrating on the rush of water as the Rhône flowed against the stone piers.

Thus, with the sun beating down on his back and his place assured in the Sorbonne's civil engineering academy, the seventeen-year-old marveled at the ancient engineers who could build something that had lasted more than a thousand years. A river cruise boat passed by, its tourists

manning the rails and snapping pictures of the bridge. Fahim stood up straight and inhaled the fresh air.

On the bridge of Avignon, we're all dancing, we're all dancing...

Filled with the generosity of spirit that arises when a young man contemplates the transition from one phase of life to the next, Fahim felt ready to head south to Marseille, where he would say goodbye to his half-brother—and put up with the Mullah Fawwah for the last time.

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Because Fahim appreciated architecture and was feeling nostalgic, his first stop in Marseille was the *Basilique Notre-Dame de la Garde*.

Perched on a high observation post above the port, the Guardian of Marseille was a masterpiece of Byzantine and Romanesque architecture. Fahim remembered his Catholic mother dragging him to the church, hiking up the hill to catch a glimpse of the sea, filling his head with images of exotic lands. He could recall asking her whether his father was in one of those lands.

“He came from there,” she replied, pointing. “Far across the sea. He is very smart.”

“And Rafa?” young Fahim asked of his three-year-old brother, whose hand he held.

“Rafa’s father is a very special holy man,” she replied gravely.

When he was done with his visit to the Guardian, he climbed a nearby hill. Fahim rapped three times on the mosque’s heavy oaken door. “I have come to see Mullah Fawwah and Rafa,” he said to the bearded twenty-something man who opened it. The sun hung low in the west, casting long shadows from the mosque’s minarets and domes. “They’re here,?”

“Who asks?”

Because he rarely visited, Fahim wasn’t recognized. He gave his name and explained his family connection.

“Wait,” the man said, closing the door to the Marseille Muslim Academy for boys, the *madrassah* attached to the Mosque.

As Fahim waited, he stepped back onto the tiled portico to admire the Eastern architecture. The neighborhood was home to many North African Muslims and boasted fifty mosques. This one was constructed by Turkish pilgrims in the sixteenth century and inspired thoughts of Central Asia with its soaring arches and golden domes.

The heavy door swung open again. Mullah Fawwah, mid-fifties with a shaggy beard and growing paunch, scrutinized Fahim closely.

“You’re late,” he said harshly, his eyes darting over Fahim’s head. “Why?”

“My train was delayed,” Fahim lied. He felt uneasy sharing details about the motorbike with the mullah.

The mullah looked at the street corners, then ushered Fahim inside. “It’s just as well. Come in and shut the door. Hurry.” Fahim did as asked. “Now remove your shirt.”

“My shirt? Why?”

“Something has happened,” the mullah said brusquely. “Just do it, Fahim. And then wash yourself in preparation for prayer. Hurry up.”

Fahim was used to the rituals of entering the mosque—removing his shoes, performing the ablutions. It struck him as odd, however, that the mullah asked him to remove his shirt. The religious scholar looked Fahim over and handed him a damp rag before letting him dress again. “Wait over here,” he said, leading Fahim to a windowless anteroom. The door clicked heavily behind the mullah as he rushed away. Fahim felt as if he’d been locked inside.

Confused by how he’d been received, he waited silently. With his father’s blind trust paying his way at Sorbonne, he consoled himself that he would never come here again, and studied the vibrant tile mosaic that dominated the space to pass the time. It depicted a colorful rendering of a palm tree grove with two men on horseback picking dates.

Midway up the door was a hinged wooden flap with a brass handle. When the interval grew longer than it should, Fahim opened the flap. Like the confessional booths his mother had dragged him to at the *Garde du Notre Dame* Church, the opening was covered by a tightly woven straw screen.

Through the screen, Fahim witnessed a hive of activity. A dozen young men were stretched out on prayer rugs, chanting incessantly, "*There is one true caliph. He is the king of the believers, the rightful heir of Mohammad...*"

Beyond the men in prayer, Fahim observed others rushing by with luggage, creating a large pile along the wall. They hurried between the buttresses supporting the coved ceiling with noticeable urgency. Amid that crowd, Fahim spotted Mullah Fawwah leading Rafa. Concerned that he might be violating a religious rule, Fahim quickly closed the flap.

Rafa and the mullah entered a few seconds later. Fahim reached for his brother's hand, which he accepted with a distant expression.

The Mullah Fawwah sat them on a bench and addressed Fahim, saying, "We are at war. The world as we know it has changed forever. That is why you are here today."

Fahim, who'd spent much of the day placidly admiring the sunny Provençal landscape, was taken aback. "What?" he asked. He found that all religious people tended to overdramatize.

"The devil Americans have invaded our homeland," the mullah continued. "They have brought an army to Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the Prophet. On an evil raid in Baghdad, the devils arrested one of our brothers. They will come here next. For us."

Fahim nodded tenuously. In his Western Civilization courses, the instructors had forced debate on the clash of civilizations and the American armed response. To the student, ensconced in the thick walls of Avignon, it had seemed an inconsequential, remote problem.

"Fahim!" the Mullah barked, jerking him by the shoulder. "You know your half-brother's father is a holy man who commands our respect."

“Yes,” Fahim said. He glanced at Rafa, who continued to stare at the wall. “So I’ve long been told.”

“He is not *just* a holy man,” the mullah shot. “He is the Prophet, Allah’s messenger on earth, the true heir of Mohammed. The devil Americans will seek to capture him and kill Rafa, his heir. That is why we leave at midnight on a ship from the Port of Marseille.”

“Going where?”

“Pakistan. And then north, to Kashmir, our ancestral home, the Garden of Eternity as described by The Prophet.” The mullah gestured to the tile motif. “The capital of Umayyad, the scene depicted on these walls, a Paradise on earth. I must protect your holy brother and take him there—and that is why you are here. *Inshallah*, you will be there soon too. But first, there is something you must do.”

Fahim swallowed. “I... don’t understand.”

Rafa glanced at Fahim before lowering his eyes. “With this attack on one of our brothers, my father, the Prophet, has declared *jihad*. *At Takwir* is at hand.”

“What is *At Takwir*?”

Rafa inhaled sharply. “You don’t know?”

The Mullah squeezed Rafa’s arm, then turned to Fahim. “It’s not your fault. I allowed you to be raised as a nonbeliever for a reason. That reason has arrived, and like us, you are now a soldier. We have very little time. The devils will come.”

“Can you tell me what *At Takwir* is?” Fahim asked again.

Rafa canted his head toward the ceiling and closed his eyes. “It is the end of days.”

Fahim turned to the Mullah Fawwah, his voice quavering. “Mullah, I must go to Paris. I have to leave now. My train,” he lied.

Three knocks on the door preceded the mullah’s response. The religious scholar opened it to reveal a fierce-looking man in black trousers and shirt carrying a hard gray case. He wore a belt with a pistol on his hip and said nothing as he stood beside the tile mosaic wall.

“Fahim, listen to me,” the mullah said. “The devil Americans are coming for us. And that includes you. You can’t leave—until you finish something.”

“But I am not a...” Fahim let his point drift, fearing he might offend them. He wanted to express that he was not a Muslim—certainly not a holy warrior. He was a young man who sought to build bridges, charm women, and earn his place in the world. He revised his response. “Why are the Americans coming for us?”

“Because they hate us and want to see our faith expunged from the earth. Trust me, Fahim, they will arrest you, torture you, imprison you for the rest of your life if they don’t kill you first. They will do it because of your brother. We cannot allow that.”

Fahim glanced at Rafa, who gazed blankly at the wall, much like the man with the pistol.

“I have to go to Paris,” the student protested.

The Mullah’s eyes hardened. “You have been designated by the Prophet for a special mission, for which we have long been preparing you. I had not planned to tell you this until the Prophet, the Emir of Umayyad, struck the devils a fatal blow. But the Americans will come here. Tonight. Which is why we must act. *You must act.*”

Terrified by their apocalyptic talk and the crazy notion that Rafa’s father was the true heir of Muhammad, Fahim stood up. The man with the pistol moved before the door.

“I am not a part of this,” he beseeched the mullah. “Rafa and I don’t share the same father, only the same mother. Mine is a wealthy Gulf Arab who placed conditions on my education. I promise never to speak of my association with you, if that is your wish, and I can conceal myself from the Americans. They’ll never know about me. How could they? You took Rafa to be a student here to follow his father’s path. But I went away to school.”

“Fahim, follow me,” the mullah said, motioning him through the door.

Again, Fahim observed the rushing men in black, the piles of luggage, the hushed voices of prayer echoing across the alcove. The mullah’s long *dishdasha* swept over the tiled floor,

swishing over his bare feet. Fahim followed him into a side room with a computer, Eastern art on the walls, and a desk cluttered with papers.

“Sit,” the mullah ordered. Fahim took the hard-backed wooden chair while the mullah hunched forward on one with clicking springs. “You think your father is a Gulf Arab, do you?”

“How else can I have a blind trust? I know what my mother is. My father visited her for pleasure. I understand that. But he looks after me from afar, even if she isn’t able.”

The holy man perched rimless glasses on the end of his nose and clicked the computer mouse, opening a webpage. Fahim recognized it as belonging to the Swiss bank that sent him money every month. “Rafa’s father, the Emir of the Umayyad Revolutionary Council, the Prophet, oversees your development, Fahim.”

A brilliant student, always quick with an answer, Fahim suddenly found himself adrift. “I don’t understand. Are you saying that the Emir is also my father?”

“Of course not. I am saying that *I* am your benefactor—through the Prophet. We have been preparing you for the great struggle, our future engineer, builder of bridges—and you have exceeded our expectations.”

“My father—”

“Fahim, open your eyes! Your father is not a Gulf Arab. He was an Indian on the faculty of *L’Université d’Aix-Marseille*, a filthy Hindu who died years ago. But none of this matters, as it was all part of Allah’s design. You are a half-brother to the bloodline of *Allah’s* messengers on earth, blessed by Him to bring about His will. The Emir has always protected you.”

Sensing the boy’s shock, the Mullah offered a reprieve. He leaned forward and grasped Fahim’s narrow wrists. “Boy, you have always been part of this. Rather than fear it, embrace it. You will go to Paris, attend the Sorbonne, and walk among the infidels. You will be exactly what we’ve prepared you to be. The Emir will pay your way and clear your path into commercial construction, where you will serve us. *Inshallah.*”

Fahim swallowed. “So... I can leave?”

“Yes, you can go to Paris,” the Mullah said. “But only if you commit your soul to the prophets, the Emir and Rafa. You must perform your *islah* to ensure allegiance to the faith.”

“What is *islah*?”

“An act of Jihad to wed your soul to the Prophet’s. Once completed, you can leave. If you do not... well, you’re a smart boy. You understand we can have no loose ends.”

Bewildered yet relieved by the prospect of his life continuing as before, Fahim nodded grimly. “I just want to go to Paris. Tell me what I need to do.”

The mullah’s eyes sparkled. “Yes? Good. Come.” He led Fahim through the arcade to the anteroom. Upon entering, Fahim noticed Rafa conferring with the other man in low tones. The case was open between them.

“He will commit to the Jihad,” the holy man announced as he entered with Fahim. “He is ready to perform his *islah*.”

On hearing this, Rafa turned to him. “Then we should all recite the *Shahada*.”

The mullah murmured his agreement and motioned for them to kneel.

Perhaps this is all they desire from me, Fahim thought as he bent over his knees in prayer. The mullah led them through the chant, pausing so Fahim could repeat the words. It was the same recitation he had heard in the prayer room. “*There is one true caliph...*”

When the anteroom fell silent, Rafa extended a black semi-automatic pistol to Fahim. “You will commit your *islah* tonight, brother. We will do it together, purifying our shared blood.”

Fahim was reluctant to touch the weapon. “Why do I need this?”

“To kill them. Before we burn them.”

“Kill who?”

“Our disgusting mother and her infidel.”

Fahim recoiled, unwilling to touch the gun.

“What,” Rafa said. “You think she loved us? She’s a whore, a liar, an addict. She sold herself. She will sell us too. She must die.”

“Rafa, I...”

Disappointed, Rafa shoved the gun in his belt and turned away. “Mullah,” he grumbled. “I told you. He is weak. Corrupt. Western.”

“Rafa!” Fahim shot with wide eyes, his voice hoarse. “You want me to kill Claudette, our mother, like it’s nothing!”

“Do not say her name!” the mullah snapped. He gestured at the man with the pistol belt. “Abdul is our best field commander. After you perform your *islah*, he will go to Paris and remain nearby as your contact.” The mullah turned to the warrior. “Tell us, Abdul, the apostate is still there, yes, with her infidel customer? We can take them now?”

“If we hurry,” Abdul replied. “The whore is in the *Le Penier*, fifth floor. We have a brother tailing her pimp, ready to strike and steal the keys.”

“Very well.” The mullah turned to Fahim. “This is it, boy. You will release your mother’s soul into *Jahanum* to cleanse your own. That is your *islah*. If you do not perform it, *you* will enter hell.”

The lyrics drifted through Fahim’s head once more, “*On the bridge at Avignon...*”

He swallowed hard, banishing the song, reflecting on the Sorbonne, the life he had earned, and the mullah’s vow of continued support. They would execute her anyway, he reasoned, his pulse pounding. And if their black hearts could murder Claudette, they wouldn’t hesitate to kill him.

“There is only one true caliph,” he replied morosely. “Give me the gun.”