



# THE GRAND NIGHT

PRELUDE

LOGAN AIRPORT,  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, USA

MOHAMMED ATTA hurried down the corridor toward the gate, checking his watch with a glance every few steps. They were late. The flight from Portland had been delayed—something about a crew change—and now they were in Boston but behind schedule. To his left was Abdulaziz al-Omari, a Saudi Arabian whom he knew from school. They had traveled together that morning, but the others—Wail al-Shehri, his brother, Waleed al-Shehri, and Satam al-Suqami—were nowhere in sight. If they weren't already on the plane, the plan was in trouble.

As the gate came into view, Atta saw that the area was empty. A wave of panic swept through the pit of his stomach, but he ignored it. Out the window he saw the airliner—a Boeing 767—still with the Jetway at its door. But there was no way to know if the others were aboard.

Atta's mind whirred. Should he cancel? Should he abandon the plan? No. His heart told him all was well. And anyway, the tickets were purchased. If the others were not onboard, he would enjoy the flight to Los Angeles and regroup from there.

He mumbled in Arabic, "I will shoot them myself if they turned coward."

Nervous and tense, Atta tried to remain calm and did his best to appear relaxed, hoping to avoid calling attention to himself. He gave his ticket to the gate attendant who printed a boarding pass, tore off the receipt portion, and handed him the rest. "Hurry! They've been waiting for you."

"It is not my fault that we are behind," Atta retorted. He hated it when women spoke to him that way.

The gate attendant ignored the comment and hustled him up the Jetway and into the plane. As Atta moved toward his assigned seat, he glanced around the passenger compartment and noted with relief that the others were present. Wail al-Shehri and his brother, Waleed al-Shehri were seated near the bulkhead, just behind first class. Satam al-Suqami was a little farther back. To his right, however, he caught sight of a man he was certain was Jewish. But something about him made Atta nervous. Before taking his seat, he caught Waleed's eye, then glanced in the man's direction. Waleed seemed to understand the gesture.

Atta squeezed into his seat and placed the seat belt across his lap. Moments later, the aircraft pushed back from the gate and rolled down the taxiway. Atta was nervous. Almost jittery. The veins in his neck throbbed and his skin felt clammy. He flexed his fingers a few times, balling them into a fist and tensing the muscles in his forearm. *Nothing to worry about*, he told himself. The others would take care of the rough stuff. He and Omari would fly the plane. That's all he needed to think about. Flying the plane.

After a pause at the end of the runway, the aircraft moved forward, picked up speed, and leapt into the air. Atta felt his back pressed against the seat and he gripped the armrest with both hands. He hated flying.

As the plane gained altitude, it banked to the right. Out the window, Atta caught sight of the coastline as it moved away. They were turning westward, he surmised. Steering to a heading that would take them toward California. He glanced around at the passengers seated near him. A smile tightened the muscles in his cheeks. They had no idea they would never reach their destination. At least, not the destination they planned.

Fifteen minutes into the flight, the seat belt sign went off and the pilot announced that beverage service would begin soon. Atta unfastened his seat belt and stood, then glanced in Waleed's direction. Of the three men brought onboard for muscle, Waleed was his favorite and the one in whom he had the most confidence. A look, a gesture, a nod was all it took to communicate with him and he never hesitated. He acted.

Without lingering, Atta stepped into the aisle and started toward the cockpit door. He reached it just as two attendants appeared in first class with a beverage cart. One moved toward him, a look of concern on her face, but before she could act or speak, Waleed grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back while Wail secured her wrists with a zip tie.

Atta heard a commotion behind him, then a scream, and knew that Waleed had taken care of the Jew. Nothing would stop them now. He grasped the knob for the cockpit door with his right hand, gave it a twist, and pushed. The door opened into the cockpit and the four of them rushed inside. Wail slit the pilot's throat with a box cutter. Satam did the same to the copilot. Blood gushed from the gaping wounds in their necks, spilled down their clothes, and dripped onto the deck. Waleed unbuckled the pilot's harness and dragged his body from the seat, then threw it on the flight deck to block the door. Satam did the same with the copilot. And while they did that, Atta climbed into the pilot's seat.

Settled in the seat, Atta grasped the wheel with both hands and felt the weight of the plane pull against his arms as the

autopilot disengaged and the flight controls came alive. A smile turned up the corners of his mouth as he banked the plane sharply to the left.

While the aircraft slowly moved in that direction, Atta glanced across the instrument panel and found it a bewildering set of screens, gauges, and panels. He'd trained for months on a simulator at the school in Florida and was certain he understood what they all meant. One for the navigation system. Another for the engine controls. A dozen more he'd determined were unnecessary and had quickly forgotten. But now, in the moment when it all counted, he felt confused. Atta closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and forced his body to relax. He knew this. He had read the manuals. He could figure it out.

Atta opened his eyes and glanced once more across the indicators on the panel. The navigation display appeared to be in map mode and there was a button to press to change it. Somewhere. Somehow. The adrenaline coursing through his body caused his thoughts to bounce from one to the next, to the next.

"Compass," he snarled. "Where's the compass?" The flight instructor had told him in an offhanded, almost joking manner that if all else failed he could use the magnetic compass. But where was it? His palms were sweaty, and he felt the fabric of his shirt stick to the skin of his back. Everyone had performed as planned. They were in control. Now the entire operation rested on him and—

Just then he caught sight of the compass—a round black ball with white letters and numbers—mounted at the top of the windshield, near the center. Atta breathed a sigh of relief and hoped the others hadn't noticed how desperate he'd been.

Using the compass as his guide, he set the plane on a course to the south. Off to the left, far in the distance, the water of the Atlantic Ocean was barely visible. He turned the craft farther in

that direction, pointing it more southeasterly on a path toward the coastline.

Minutes later, as the ocean drew nearer, Atta banked the plane to the right and followed the water, keeping it just off his left shoulder and hoping not to fly past the city. It all looked much smaller from twenty thousand feet.

Fifteen minutes later, New York City came into view. Satam pointed over Atta's shoulder. "Look. That is the city."

Atta smiled and pushed the wheel forward, causing the plane to gradually descend. "Not too much," Omari cautioned. "Not yet. We must get all the way there."

"I know," Atta growled. "I've done this many times in practice."

Over Yonkers, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center came into view, standing stark and angular against the clear blue sky.

"There it is!" Omari exclaimed. "There it is!"

"Allahu Akbar!" Atta shouted and the others picked it up as a chant. "Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! God is great! God is great!" All the while, the Trade Center loomed larger and larger in the airplane's windshield.





## JERUSALEM 1908

THE GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN filtered through a window to the left as Mohammed Amin al-Husseini, eleven years old, stood at the door to his father's bedroom. The light cast a soft glow over his father, Mohammed Tahir al-Husseini, who was lying in bed. According to his mother, his father had not long to live and the young boy found it difficult to see him like this. He'd been so powerful, so determined, and now he was reduced to a feeble shell of himself, unable to do more than lift his head to eat.

For as long as Amin could remember, his father had been the ranking qadi and the chief justice of the Sharia court in Jerusalem. The Hanafi Mufti of Jerusalem. A powerful man. Qualified to render binding opinions regarding the application of Sharia law to daily life. The one who told others how the Quran applied to events of the day.

Not only that, he sat on the Committee of A'ayan, which, among other things, scrutinized sales of land in Jerusalem to foreigners. Since 1897, when he first joined the committee, he had effectively stopped the sale of Ottoman land to Jews wanting

to emigrate to Palestine. But that year, with his illness growing steadily more severe, his influence seemed to wane. More Jews than ever before found their way into Palestine, sponsored and coordinated by the World Zionist Organization. That year, also, the Jews established the Jewish Agency to oversee their effort. Housed in a ramshackle red building on the outskirts of Jaffa, the Agency was operated by Arthur Ruppin and paid for by someone named Rothschild who, based on comments from his father, Amin thought must have lots of money.

“The Jews are always looking for one more Arab willing to sell his soul to the infidels,” Amin’s father explained. “One more Arab willing to give up his land to the Jews.” It had been a constant battle and right then, staring at his father as he lay in bed, Amin wondered if the struggle against the Jews was to blame for his father’s condition. The Jews stole Arab land. Now they were stealing his father.

As the young Amin al-Husseini stared at his father, he remembered stories the old man told him. Of an Arab kingdom from the past ruled by daring men who vanquished every foe, even the apostate Europeans who dared to come near Arab lands. Stories of Islamic scholars whose work created the foundations of mathematics, science, and astronomy. All of it a gift from Allah to his people. A gesture of blessing for their obedience in conquering the land, imposing Sharia law as far as their reach allowed, establishing a human order according to Allah’s divine word, worshipping him in righteousness and truth. That was the way Allah intended it to be, his people ruling and reigning over—

Just then, the old man’s eyes popped open and he looked over at Amin, then motioned for him to come closer. With fear and trepidation Amin approached the bed, but halted a few steps away. Still the old man urged him closer and, when Amin was within arm’s reach, took the boy by the forearm and drew him even closer. Standing against the edge of the bed, the old man’s



body brushing against his hip, Amin smelled the musky scent of his father and the stale bedclothes wrapped around him.

The old man looked up at him with a smile. “You must be strong in the days that are to come.”

Amin nodded. “I will do my best to look after Mother.”

“I am sure you will,” the old man replied. “But I am thinking far beyond the immediacy of the moment.”

Amin frowned. “I do not understand.”

The old man nodded. “I know. But someday, when you are a man, you will take my place. When that time comes, you must not be afraid. You must discharge the duties of our office with knowledge, wisdom, and discipline, but never with fear.”

“Yes, Father,” Amin replied.

“And above all, you must not allow the Jews to take the land.”

“But shouldn’t Kamil do this? He is the oldest.”

The old man sighed. “Kamil will hold the seat, but only until you are old enough to accept it. He is a good man, but he lacks the vision for what must be done.”

“And what is it that must be done?”

The old man gestured for him to lean closer and tugged at his arm. Amin leaned down, his head turned to the side to avoid the old man’s hot, stale breath. His ear, though, was pressed near the old man’s lips. “We must kill them all,” the old man urged in an angry, coarse whisper.

Amin shrank back, startled by what he just heard, but the old man gripped Amin’s forearm tighter and focused his gaze with intensity. “All of them,” he insisted, using his finger in a pointed gesture. “Every last Jew must die. Or they will kill us all.” He stared at the young boy intently, as if to emphasize his point, and held his gaze for what seemed like a long time, and only when Amin nodded in approval did he let go.

With his point made, the old man seemed to relax and a smile returned to his face. “When you are older, you will remember this

moment and know I am right. And when that day comes, you will take courage. Allah is well pleased with you, Amin. He is very well pleased.”

The old man rested his hands on his chest and closed his eyes. Moments later, Amin heard the rhythmic sound of his father’s breathing as he drifted off to sleep. He stood there watching, not understanding anything his father had said except the last of it. That Allah was very pleased with him. That part left him feeling warm and comfortable inside. Knowing that Allah was pleased made the mystery of his father’s words seem like a future filled with hope. And right then, young Amin al-Husseini very much needed hope.

A few nights later, Amin was awakened by the sound of his mother’s mournful wail. Terrified by it, he slid farther down in bed, the covers pulled over his head, and knew that his father had died.



The death of Amin’s father did little to change his daily routine. He still awakened before dawn, just as always, and prepared himself for the day. As the sun rose above Jerusalem, he faced toward the Qibla—the Kaaba mosque in Mecca—as required by the Quran. He knew the direction to face by the location of a mark his father had made for him on the bedroom wall; a mark determined by using an astrolabe.

Oriented toward the Qibla, Amin raised his hands to shoulder height with his palms turned out and said the intention, the first act of Morning Prayer. That was followed by the Salah, also prayed while standing, then the Ruku, and on through the morning ritual. When his religious duty was complete, he ate breakfast and departed for school.

That was the same morning routine Amin had followed for as long as he could remember. None of that changed with his father's death except that he no longer felt the old man's presence in the house or heard the rumble of his voice as he prayed in the next room. But one thing—one very important thing—had changed.

When Mohammed Tahir al-Husseini was a young man, he married and had a family that included seven daughters and one son, Kamil. By the time Tahir was sixty years old, his children from that marriage were adults with families of their own. But the year Tahir turned sixty, his first wife died. Not long after she was buried, he married again to a woman named Mahbuba, who was almost forty years younger than he. With Mahbuba, Tahir produced one child each year for the next eight years, one of whom was Amin, the oldest of the second group.

Life was good for Amin and, owing to his father's position and the many generations his family had lived in Jerusalem, he and his siblings enjoyed many privileges. But now, with his father no longer alive, Amin knew he would come under the influence of Kamil, his father's oldest son by his first wife, who was almost certain to inherit his father's position as Mufti.

Many years separated Amin from Kamil. They saw each other on family occasions and got along well, but they had a different mother and did not grow up together. Amin was concerned about what that might mean for his future and especially how he, his mother, and his siblings would fare. At his father's death, his father's business interests fell to Kamil, and much of what might happen to Amin would depend on just how honorable Kamil proved to be. Amin had heard many stories of older brothers brutalizing younger siblings in just such a situation and he worried the same might happen to him.

Amin attended the Rashidiya School located near Herod's Gate. A center of learning for Muslim boys in East Jerusalem, the school taught a version of Salafi Islam promoted by Rashid Rida,

an Egyptian cleric. Salafism promoted a return to the Islamic faith of the Salaf—the first three generations of Muslim leaders, which the Salafists viewed as the true and correct form of Islam. Begun in the eighteenth century by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the Salafi movement was primarily a reaction to innovation among Islamic groups and the encroachment of Western lifestyle on popular Islamic culture. In response, Salafists sought a return to strict adherence to Sharia law and the practice of regular worship.

Teachers at the Rashidiya School did their best to impress upon their students the necessity of following a strict view of Islam while not squelching the youthful enthusiasm of their pupils. Their demand for rigorous study, devoted worship, and a life of contemplation struck some of Amin's fellow students as more than necessary. Amin, however, found it liberating and invigorating. He also enjoyed the social interaction the school afforded.

Two months after the family's mourning ended, Amin and his friend, Nafez Musallam, sat outside the school during an afternoon break. As they enjoyed the warm sunshine, Amin broached the subject of his worries regarding his homelife and future. Nafez listened patiently, then said, "Do not to worry. Your brother is smart. He will do the right thing."

"I am not so sure of that," Amin replied.

Nafez shrugged. "Even if he does not, you are smart and you pay attention to the smallest detail. Allah will easily take you to your destiny."

Amin frowned. "You say that as if you know it to be true."

"Yes," Nafez nodded. "I do. Because it *is* true."

"But how do you know it is true? How do you know I even have a destiny? And if I do, how do you know that Allah will take me to it?"

Nafez smiled. "My father tells me this every day."

"And what does it mean?"

Nafez folded his arms across his chest. “My father tells me that I should do the next thing and not worry about the question of life and purpose and meaning. He says those questions are too big for me now. That I have not lived long enough for Allah to reveal things easily. Only just the next thing. If I do the next thing, Allah will combine all of the ‘next things’ into a path. But it will only become visible to me when I have lived long enough to look back and see how he has led me.”

The words seemed to find a place in Amin’s soul. He was about to ask another question when one of their classmates, Saleem Namir, appeared. Saleem was from a minor branch of the Nashashibi clan, a prominent Arab family of merchants and landowners. Some of Namir’s relatives were the ones who wanted to sell their land to Jews and were blocked by Amin’s father. “It is worthless land,” they argued. “It is only right that we charge the Jews twice what it is worth and watch them die trying to make a living from it.” Amin’s father had been unpersuaded by that argument and adamant in his opposition to the Nashashibi sales, for which Namir’s family, and many members of the extended clan, resented him deeply.

Namir caught Amin’s eyes. “I hear your brother is among those being considered for the position of mufti.”

“Yes,” Amin replied. He did not like the look on Namir’s face and was certain Namir was looking for trouble. “What of it?”

“He is too young and inexperienced for a position like that,” Namir said.

“He has been a qadi for many years.”

“Yes, but everyone knows only the Nashashibi have the intellect for responsibility of the mufti’s position.”

Namir’s words burned deep inside Amin. An insult to Kamil was bad enough, but the comment about intelligence was a slap at Amin’s father. He had been the Mufti of Jerusalem for a long time and now one of the Nashashibi—perhaps all of them—was saying

his father was not intelligent enough to hold that position in his own right and had gained it by nefarious means.

Amin's neck stiffened. The veins in his neck throbbed and he clinched his fist. "You insult my father," he growled.

"Your father is dead." Namir smirked. "And it is long past time for the Nashashibi to take back what is rightfully theirs."

Surely, Namir was repeating words he had heard from his kinsmen. Baseless, slanderous accusations born of envy and greed. But one who repeats the words of another makes himself liable for the import of them just the same as if they came from his own mind, and as the last phrase slipped from Namir's lips, Amin lunged for him. He grabbed Namir by the hair, pulled his head down to his side, and in rapid succession punched him three times in the face. He was about to add a fourth when Nafez stepped between them.

"It is enough, Amin," Nafez shouted. "It is enough!"

Amin let go and Namir took a step back. "You will pay for this," he snarled.

"Insult my family again," Amin replied, "and you will pay with your life."

They were but juveniles. Mere boys on the school ground. But everyone who heard Amin that day knew he meant every word of what he said. The look on Nafez's face said he did, too.



A few months later, the Jerusalem Hanafi Ulama, a group of scholars in the Hanafi school of Quran tradition, who sat as Sharia judges in Jerusalem, gathered to consider a successor to Mohammed Tahir al-Husseini. The two leading contenders were Tahir's oldest son, Kamil al-Husseini, and Raghیب al-Nashashibi, a member of the rival Nashashibi clan. After two days of deliberation, the Ulama chose Tahir's oldest son, Kamil. He was

designated Hanafi Mufti and took his father's seat on the Sharia court.

The next day, after the Ulama made its decision, Amin confronted Namir at school, taunting him about his brother's appointment as mufti. "It was only because of sympathy and a bribe," Namir sneered.

"A bribe?" Amin exclaimed.

"Yes," Namir replied coldly. "Everyone knows the Husseinis have no hope of success without corrupting those in power."

As before, a fight quickly followed. This time, however, Nafez stood back and let the two go at it. But when Amin had Namir pinned to the ground, pummeling him repeatedly with blows to the head, Nafez became worried that Amin might actually follow through on the earlier threat and beat Namir to death. With the ease and self-assurance only a friend could show, he grabbed Amin with both arms around his chest and lifted him off Namir. "That's enough."

"I'll kill him!" Amin shouted.

"I know," Nafez replied. "That is why you must stop."

Reluctantly, Amin allowed his body to relax and stood watching from a safe distance while Namir scrambled to his feet and started in the opposite direction.

"Let him go," Nafez advised. "Pay no attention to what he says."

"He's an idiot," Amin retorted. "Just like everyone in his family."

"I don't think he will ever like you," Nafez said.

"Yes," Amin replied. "And I don't care. I just don't care."