

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# BRAD THOR

"STUNNING."

—*Publishers Weekly*



## THE LAST PATRIOT

A THRILLER

# BRAD THOR

## THE LAST PATRIOT



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Pocket Books

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

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First Pocket Books paperback edition June 2009

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Cover design by Alan Dingman

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5

ISBN 978-1-4165-4384-8

ISBN 978-1-4165-8039-3 (ebook)



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four of the most courageous people I know



“Let no one of you say that he has acquired the entire Koran, for how does he know that it is all? Much of the Koran has been lost; thus let him say, ‘I have acquired of it what is available.’ ”

—Ibn Umar al-Khattab, 7th-century companion of Mohammed and 2nd Muslim Caliph

# THE LAST PATRIOT

# PROLOGUE

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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

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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