

Prologue

Washington, D.C., 1997

“I had a dream last night.” Slanted rays transformed the imam’s gray beard into glistening silver.

“I stood in a great hall. It was filled with thousands of flags representing the world’s countries.

Then all of the flags dipped toward the ground as if they were bowing except for one.”

The imam stood beneath a dome at the Islamic Center. Behind him a wall of green, blue and gold tiles formed a striking geometric pattern like a woven tapestry. Rashid leaned over to Samuel. “This is the teacher I told you about. His name is Abdul Kamal.”

The man in front of Rashid turned around and frowned.

“In the center of the hall stood one flag. Can you guess which one?” The old man’s dark eyes, nearly hidden behind drooping skin, searched the silent room. “It was Turkey.”

Heads throughout the hall nodded.

“So what,” Samuel muttered. He pulled his t-shirt away from sticky skin. The July heat was making its way inside.

“Cousin, some of Islam’s greatest leaders are from Turkey.”

What concerned Samuel more than the dream was whether his parents would discover where he was this Friday afternoon. It was a holiday for students and an administration day for

teachers. He told them he was going to see Rashid which was true. But he left out the part about coming to a mosque. They would have strictly forbidden it.

The imam's raspy voice rang out. "Soon Islam will rise again to the glory it once enjoyed." He raised his hands upward as if appealing directly to Allah. "Last night I cried out to God. Why have you allowed the Christians and Jews to oppress your people? How long must we wait before the infidels who have controlled the world for so long see justice? How long before the Mahdi returns? The Twelfth Imam, the Guided One, the Lord of the Age."

Samuel had never seen such passion in his parents' church.

Rashid leaned over and whispered, "Muslims have been waiting centuries for the Mahdi to return. He's our Messiah. He will return in power and destroy his enemies. The whole world will worship him."

The imam lowered his hands and opened a book. "O prophet, urge the faithful to fight. If there are twenty among you with determination, they will vanquish two-hundred; if there are a hundred, they will slaughter a thousand unbelievers, for the infidels are a people devoid of understanding."

"The passage is from the Qur'an." Rashid covered his mouth with his hand to mute his voice.

Abdul stared into the crowd of worshippers. His eyes moved back and forth across the crowd. They stopped. “But even with one faithful, Allah can change the world as he did with his prophet Mohammed.”

Is he looking at me? The sweat running down Samuel’s back turned to an icy chill. The silence in the mosque became so pronounced he was afraid the men near him could hear his heart beating.

Abdul motioned with his hands for everyone to pray. Samuel leaned forward and pressed his forehead against an image of a doorway woven into the rug. The imam began to pray out loud.

Samuel knew every word the old man said before he said it.

How could he? Samuel had never set foot in a mosque. Yet everything felt familiar—the colors, the smells, the light.

He began to pray out loud. Words came slowly at first, then uncontrollably. The first few he spoke; the rest he sang. Rashid jabbed him with an elbow, but Samuel couldn’t stop. He didn’t understand anything he said, and from the confused stares around him, neither did anyone else. But it sounded beautiful, an unknown melody pouring from the depths of his soul.

What is happening to me?

The unexpected interruption of prayers brought a shocked look from the worshippers.

Rashid looked frightened.

“Come here young man,” the imam called out.

Samuel rose and walked toward the front of the mosque before several hundred Muslim men. As he drew closer, he could see the old man’s skin was like worn leather.

“Who are you?” The teacher walked out from behind the podium.

“Samuel Kramer.” He looked up at Abdul who stood nearly a foot higher on the podium.

He wished at that moment his name was anything but Samuel. Something like Rashid.

Something more Muslim. For the first time he realized how Jewish his name sounded.

“Where did you learn to speak Aramaic?”

“I..I can’t. The only language I know is English.”

The imam raised his eyebrows. “You spoke every word flawlessly. Do you have any idea what you said?”

“No.” And he didn’t want to know. It had been a mistake to come to the mosque.

The old man took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. A pungent smell of strong coffee flowed from his mouth. “My soul is Islam.” He paused as if he were carefully weighing his next words. His dark eyes glistened. “I have called you as a father calls his son to crush the infidels. To throw down the mighty and exalt the lowly.”

A gasp rippled through the mosque. Abdul stood and stared into the crowd. The stoop in his posture was gone; his sallow complexion transformed into a crimson glow.

“What have we witnessed?” He stood before the speechless crowd. “A young boy speaks in an ancient language few know. I’ve never seen such a thing. Can anyone explain it?” He waited for a reply. But no one spoke. “These aren’t his words. It’s a prophecy.”

He looked back at Samuel and studied him for what seemed like a long time. He placed his hands on Samuel’s shoulders and looked down into his eyes and smiled. His teeth were stained like old ivory. “You are only a boy. And many here may be asking, ‘Why would Allah call a boy?’ Many have been called in their youth.”

I’m not a boy. I’m sixteen years old.

In a loud voice the imam cried out. “The Mahdi will reappear on the appointed day. He will fight against the forces of evil, lead a revolution, and set up a new world order based on justice, righteousness, and virtue. Islam will be victorious.”

The old man laid trembling hands on Samuel’s head as he bowed. “God has called you to strike fear into the hearts of the infidels. Perhaps, he is calling you to prepare the world for the Mahdi’s return. That is something you will have to discover for yourself. I will give you a new name, one more appropriate for the task before you. Your Muslim name shall be Sulaiman Hadid, after the great leader Sulayman the Magnificent. It means strong prophet.”

Abdul lifted his hands from Samuel's head.

He looked up at the imam. "How will I know what to do?"

"You will know at the right time, my son. You will know."