

The Middle East

1969

By the time he was eight August Priest already spoke six different languages and by the time he left high school at nineteen he had mastered just about every language, including all of the dialects used in the Arab/ Israeli world.

His parents died when he was very young and he had been raised by his aunt and uncle, who were childless by choice—for the most part, August was left to his own devices. His parents had been quite wealthy and had left August a very large inheritance, though it never seemed very important to him.

He grew up watching *Father Knows Best* and *Rin Tin Tin*, television shows that helped him to develop the moral code he lived by. He was also a student of history, especially the history of military warfare. He studied every battle that had ever been written about, and played out scenarios in his mind, focusing on how his versions might have changed the outcome. In the process he became a brilliant military tactician, a man so skilled that the US relied on him to orchestrate every American victory over the next few decades.

When he was still quite young, August began to master a variety of weapons—knives, handguns, rifles—and was such a natural that he easily became an expert. He entered shooting contests all over the country and always won; no one could beat him and in fact no one could even come close: he was like a machine and he never missed a target whether it was moving or stationary.

He was written up in newspapers all over the country and that is what caught the attention of Neil Hawthorne, who had just been made the head a newly formed division at the Central Intelligence Agency. He could see that August was the perfect addition to his new division: he was big and powerful, and he was a master of languages and weapons. Hawthorne was a very ambitious man who wanted status, but who craved power even more. Neil saw that August had a singular quality: he viewed every matter as either right or wrong—for him, there was no middle ground. Hawthorne realized that August Priest was the perfect type to be manipulated, and so in 1968 he recruited him as a CIA operative.

Hawthorne assigned Priest a mission: to seek out potential threats to the United States, which at that time meant threats to the American economy. August was to pose as a college student researching a paper on the Middle East and its people. He was given a contact the agency had been using to get information, and was told that was the best place to start.

In 1969 when he arrived in Jerusalem to start his assignment it didn't take him long to realize that anyone supposedly embedded in groups hostile to America was merely feeding the US whatever it wanted to hear in return for a payment. It didn't even occur to these people that August could understand every word they spoke: they thought he was a young fool and they bragged constantly about how they had so utterly tricked the Americans.

They had no real connection to any groups and the information they offered was of little help to August so he set out to make his own contacts. It did not take him long to meet a boy named Aziz, who worked in Mahane Yehuda outdoor market in Jerusalem. August guessed he was around sixteen or seventeen, though Aziz would never confirm that, nor would he ever give August his last name. He did want to learn English and August began to teach the boy. Before

long Aziz was speaking English so well you would have thought he had been brought up in small town America.

August used his role as a teacher to try to gain Aziz's trust, but trust didn't flow freely in Israel at that time. The 1967 war was still on everyone's minds and August was certain that the Israelis were watching his every move. He had never been very political and, in his mind, he hadn't been sent to the Middle East to decide who was right and who was wrong. He had been sent for one reason: to determine if the conflicts of the region could at some point endanger the American economy. But he could see that that mission was changing very quickly.

It took August a lot longer than he anticipated to get Aziz to trust him enough to start talking freely, but when he open up August was astounded by what he knew. He spoke of the once powerful Ottoman Empire whose defeat in World War I had changed the region forever. The United States and its allies had then redrawn maps, creating new countries, for which they installed their own puppet rulers.

"How do you know all of this, Aziz?" August asked. He was well educated, but he knew nothing of the Ottoman Empire, as it was not something that was taught in American schools. He felt as if he was being schooled by this young boy.

"August, that is the problem with you westerners, you see only what is in your best interests," Aziz told him.

"Then tell me what you see, Aziz."

"Look at where we stand, August. This state of Israel—was it here fifty years ago?"

August didn't even try to reply, since he knew Aziz wasn't really asking.

“No, August, it was not, and yes, I am well aware of what the Nazis did to the Jewish people. It was horrible but neither I nor my people had anything to do with that. When the Jewish people needed their own country it was our home they were given.”

August wasn't sure that what Aziz said was true, but he could see that it didn't really matter: the point was that it was Aziz's truth. “Tell me more, Aziz,” he said.

“Here most of us are born into poverty and despair and that breeds hatred, so, yes, we're angry. August, we cannot vote, we have no rights, and our leaders were not chosen by us but by other countries. Look at how your own country was built, August: your ancestors arrived and they either killed the people who lived there, forced them to live by their ways, or exiled them to a place they didn't want to be. Where are your armies now, August? They're in the jungles of Vietnam trying to make those people live by your ways. Someday, August, your armies will come fight here in the Arab world and your people will try to force your way of life on us. Yes, we are angry with America and that anger will grow stronger as long as you keep helping those who keep us in poverty. We are not as ignorant as you Westerners think we are; we realize that without your help and your weapons none of what is happening here would be possible. Today, August, I see you as a possible friend but I fear someday I will only see you as my enemy.”

“Aziz, what do you think life is like in America? There are some Americans who are very wealthy but there are some who live in poverty and in situations much like yours.”

Aziz began to laugh. “You want me to believe that in America, the richest country in the world, there are those who live in poverty. August, please do not take me for a fool.”

August soon came to realize that Aziz's world view had been carefully shaped and molded. The fact that it was shared by far too many of those his age made him very worried about what the

future might bring. Over the next five months he learned a great deal from Aziz and his comrades.

By the time his mission was over and he was ready to leave August understood that these people would never give up their cause. They believed that their home and future had been stolen from them, and that America was to blame.

August had been sent to determine imminent threats to the American economy. What he discovered, though, was that although the threat might not be imminent, it was far more dangerous than anyone could have imagined. These young men grew up hating America; because the US policies toward the Middle East were not going to change, that hatred would continue to grow and at some point would boil over into action.

Aziz came to visit August the night before he left. “August, I have come to think of you as my friend and have learned to trust you, but I think it is time you told me the truth.”

August was somewhat taken back by Aziz’s words. He thought that his ruse had been very clever and that Aziz had never suspected that August was anything other than what he claimed to be. His superior at the CIA had never said that his mission was covert, he had simply asked him to gather information. That was just what he had done and he saw no harm in telling Aziz the truth. Besides, he had come to think of Aziz as someone who was true to his cause, and he admired him for that.

“The truth, Aziz. Which truth would you like? The truth that I was sent here by my government to determine whether there are potential threats to our sacred economy? The truth that no one in my country has a clue what is really going on here, and if they did I truly doubt they would even care? Or the truth that I too have come to think of you as a friend and that I can see how you

have come to hate my country and blame us for your plight? Which truth works best for you, Aziz?”

Aziz smiled walked over to August, put his arms around him, and hugged him. “My friend, perhaps it is time for your people to learn the truth—and who better to tell them than the man they sent to find it?” Aziz spoke as he held August at arms’ length, his hands resting on his shoulders.

Suddenly August felt empowered. Maybe he could change what he saw as an injustice. How could his bosses fail to see the danger in allowing the present situation to continue? Surely they would discern the future threat to the US, in the same way he did.

“Yes, Aziz, I promise you this: I will tell them the truth and I will do my best to make them understand that your people see us as the demon who controls and oppresses them. I will tell them that your hatred of us is growing by the day.”

“Thank you, August. That is all I can ask of you. Safe journey, my friend,” Aziz said as he left the hotel room.

August wasn’t sure why he was suddenly feeling like a hero but he was. He was both the early warning system for what might someday be the greatest threat to the US and the man who had the power to change the lives of millions of people who lived under oppressive rule. He wondered if that make him an idealist or just naïve, but at the moment it didn’t matter—he knew what he had to do.

He sat down at his typewriter and began to write the report he would turn in when he returned to Washington. He would call it “The Priest Report.”

August was certain that he had completed his mission and that he had done an exemplary job. He was thrilled when two days later Neil Hawthorne told him to report to the Pentagon the following day at 11:00 A.M. to discuss his report. August felt certain that he would be congratulated and that his superiors would express their gratitude.

When he arrived at the Pentagon he was escorted into the meeting room by two uniformed officers. To August's surprise the meeting was already in progress and he was told to sit outside the room and wait. One of the officers went into the room while the other waited with August. About ten minutes August was summoned into the room.

The first thing August noticed was that the room was thick with smoke—the cigars reeked. The second thing he noticed was that there were seven people in the room and only seven chairs. There was literally no place for him to sit down. Neil Hawthorne was seated at one end of the table at the other was an officer who didn't even glance at August when he had come in. The remaining five men all wore uniforms reflecting different branches of the military.

“August, do you really believe that these young men are going to end up being one of the greatest threats our county will face in the future?” Hawthorne asked him.

August thought hard before he answered: these men had obviously already come to a conclusion about what he had submitted, and their view differed from his. They thought so little of him and his report that none of them had even bothered to introduce themselves. He could either cover his ass or stay true to his conscience and keep his promise to Aziz. He made the only choice he could live with.

“Yes, sir, I do. I'm not sure anyone realizes the hatred our actions are fostering. Believe me, no people will allow themselves to be dominated forever—eventually they will rise up. Sir, if

history has taught us anything, it is that empires that do not allow their peoples to be free cannot last.”

One of the men rolled his eyes. “What are they going to do, son—come over here and throw camel shit at us?”

Everyone laughed except August.

“I did not say that they were planning to attack us, sir, but these people are far from ignorant and they believe that the people who rule over them can only do so either with our help or at the very least, our ambivalence. As I stated in my report, in their minds, we are the great demon.”

August knew it was time to stop talking because no one was listening. He knew that if things did not change men like Aziz would rise up and take revenge against those who had oppressed them—and the US would be at the top of that list. He could not understand why these officers could not see what was so clear to him.

“Thank you, August, I’ll see you back at Langley tomorrow,” Hawthorne said as he dismissed August with a wave of his right hand.

What August could not know was that on that day Neil Hawthorne was filled with joy; he was full of himself because everything was going exactly as planned, and now he would use August for his own purposes.

After August left the room, the man in the suit at the other end of the table looked up and tapped his pen on the table. The room went quiet. “I want this report buried and I want all records of this meeting buried and I especially want to make sure that that young man is relegated to a position in which he cannot cause any trouble. Is that understood?”

The other six men in the room all nodded their heads.

August stood fuming in the hallway; a part of him wanted to walk back in there and rip those men to pieces. He knew at that moment he could have killed each of them and felt no remorse—in fact, he would have enjoyed every moment of it. It was the first time in his adult life he had ever felt that way. He had learned to control his rage when he was still a child. When he was eleven, there had been an incident: he had beaten two older boys so badly that they had spent weeks in the hospital. Even at that age, he realized that he enjoyed hurting others, and that he must use the anger inside him in more productive ways.

He had conquered those feelings and now it was rare for him to feel any normal human emotion. Neil Hawthorne had somehow seen that in him and had planned to use it to his advantage.

That day as August was escorted out of the Pentagon, he knew that the last few months had changed him in ways that would forever alter his life. On the very next day August Priest would be twenty years old.

Chapter 1

Washington, D.C.

2016

“Fuck you, Rells, you bottom-feeding piece of shit!”

The senior aid to the very liberal Democratic Senator from New York yelled those words right before he hung up on his caller, one Jason Rells, whose syndicated column, “Rells Tells,” had been dishing out secrets for over fifteen years. This time Rells had been calling to ask if the rumor was true that the married Senator’s penis had accidentally ended up in his housekeeper’s mouth. Jason knew that it was nothing more than a rumor, which had likely been started by a conservative group. The right wing had been trying to oust the Senator from office for a long time and this was an election year.

But Jason Rells didn’t care if it was true—he just liked to rattle people’s cages.

At 48, Rells had never been married, though he loved women, and outside of drinking very good single malt scotches, they were his favorite pastime. Women had the same feeling about Jason: he was handsome, well-built, and had an amazing amount of charm when it served his purpose, and that purpose was always to get something from someone, whether it was information or, in the case of a woman he desired, sex, and maybe information, too.

Jason had many acquaintances but no real friends and he preferred it that way. After one of his columns destroyed the political career of an up and coming congressman, Rells told his editor

that if he had caught his father cheating on his mother he would have put it on the front page. Jason Rells didn't have a conscience: he didn't believe in second chances and claimed that he didn't regret a single thing he had written. But it didn't start out that way.

Jason Rells started his career as a reporter at a small newspaper in Virginia but he wanted more. He wanted money and he wanted people to know who he was and he didn't care what he had to do it make that happen. He saw how much money the photographers were getting for a candid shot of a celebrity: they were such easy marks even though they spent a fortune trying to avoid being caught off guard. Jason figured that politicians would be an easy mark, too. So he quit his job and moved to suburban Maryland.

It didn't take him long to figure out that the most powerful people were the ones who were most likely to do something incredibly stupid—all that wealth made them think they were untouchable. Jason would do anything to get the dirt. In the beginning he favored disguises—he'd dress up as a homeless person or pretend to be a deaf mute, whatever it took to get close enough to hear something he could use. When he couldn't get close, he used a small parabolic microphone.

He quickly established himself as a force to be reckoned with, a feeling that intoxicated him. He was soon addicted to it.

It was close to lunch time and Jason decided to take walk over to Casey's, a Washington D.C. watering hole. Jason had done very well for himself and his Capitol Hill townhouse was about ten blocks from Casey's. The place had been around for decades and you could pretty much count on finding politicians from both parties and journalists in a temporary truce. Casey's was neutral ground—even Jason Rells respected that and never used anything he saw or heard there.

He knew better: he couldn't risk being barred from the place that had the best sandwiches and burgers in D. C. Besides, he liked the fact that most of the people in there hated his guts.

Snagging a table at lunchtime wasn't easy, but Jason always ate at the bar, where most of the journalist ate. Jason found a seat and as soon as Ralph the bartender saw him he reached for a bottle of single malt.

"Not today, Ralph, just bring me pit beef sandwich and a bottle of water."

"Don't tell me you're on the wagon, Rells," said Billy McMillan, a sportswriter who was sitting on Jason's right. He was called him Big Billy, and he had shared plenty of drinks with Jason over the years. Jason enjoyed talking with Billy: Jason couldn't have cared less about the sports world and Billy thought politics and politicians were beneath him.

"Nah, Billy, just needed a clear head today," Jason answered.

"Since when do you need a clear head to do what you do?" Billy said, laughing.

Jason chuckled. "I am getting some stuff in today from my requests."

"Shit, are you still doing that Freedom of Information crap?"

"Yup. I know it's a waste of time but I just find it entertaining."

"What the fuck is entertaining about looking at a bunch of pages where most of the words are redacted?" Billy asked him.

Information junkie that he was, Jason sent in requests once a month using different words, hoping someday someone would slip up and he would get something worth writing about. Of course, that had never happened; every document he received had been so redacted you could barely make out a couple sentences. Jason liked to play a game with himself and try to imagine

what was really on the pages. “Who knows, Billy, maybe one of these days I’ll get lucky,” Jason said, smiling.

“You got a better chance of being asked to join those politicians over there for milk and cookies, buddy boy,” Billy told him as he got up to leave. He raised his left hand in a half-assed goodbye gesture and didn’t even bother to look back.

Jason finished his sandwich, dropped a twenty on the bar, and stood up. “Put it on my tab, Ralph,” Jason yelled out as he walked down the bar towards the entrance. He looked around the room and even though Casey’s was neutral territory no one bothered to look in his direction as he left.

Now a lot of people would take offense at that, but not Jason Rells: to him, it was a symbol of his power, his position, and his ability to trash their careers, should he decide to make them his next target. Jason headed back to his townhouse eager to see what goodies his requests had returned this time. He had thought up a really wild request and sent it off: he queried the CIA as to whether any priests had ever been suspected of spying for unfriendly governments. That should throw a zinger in the mix.