

مَهْرَجَانُ دِمَشْقَ لِلْفَنِّ وَالْمَسْرُوحَاتِ

المبدعون يتحاورون

**DEATH  
IN  
DAMASCUS**

a novella  
by

**ADAM DARIUS**



**DEATH IN DAMASCUS**  
an Internet novella  
by **ADAM DARIUS**

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***Death in Damascus* is set against the intriguing background of Damascus, Baalbeck, Amsterdam and Kyoto. A crime novella peopled by white supremacists, midnight stalkers and ballet dancers trapped by the mirrors of their own relentless narcissism, the intertwined lives of its obsessive characters lead inexorably to the book's harrowing climax.**

“Adam Darius has captured the ambience of Damascus...the chilling incident in the Netherlands overwhelms the reader... I was thrilled by his sensitivity in dealing both with his subject matter and the dance world...I enjoyed reading the work and was intrigued by it, the dialogue in his novella exceptionally good, very dramatic and rich, with conflicts and confrontations... I hadn't read such a work on the dance world before, with so much wealth of information and precise psychological analysis.”

**Dr. Riad Ismat,**

ranking Syrian playwright, director, critic  
and Syrian Ambassador to Pakistan

“a book that quickens our hearts as we witness the intimate unfolding of events...an inventive literary portrait”

**Kent Smith,**

Director of Art  
Illinois State Museum, Springfield, USA

### **About the author**

Adam Darius has appeared as a mime artist and dancer in over 80 countries and has written 12 previous books. In *Death in Damascus*, he has called upon his extensive familiarity with the Middle East to authenticate the background of this magnetic narrative.

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The characters of Dieter Johnson, Zafir al-Ziad, Patricia Andrews, Khaled al-Mallah, Fahad Hassan, Khattab, Stanley Goodlaw, Henryck Ryker, Sibylla Smith, Luke and Ulfat Rihawi in this novella are completely fictional, having no existence outside the imagination of the author. Nor do these aforementioned characters have any connection whatsoever to actual people living or dead, or bearing the same name or names. Moreover, none of these characters are even remotely prompted by any individual within the author's past or present experience. And, finally, all the incidents in which these foregoing characters appear are born of the author's fantasy.

To **Dr. Erik Näslund**,

director of the Dansmuseet in Stockholm,  
who devotedly preserves the fleeting  
glories of the dance.

I consider it no small honour to find myself  
within his incandescent galaxy of  
great art and artists.

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## Foreword

by Kay Hunter

Best-selling author of *Duet for a Lifetime*, *Ballet in the Blitz*, and co-author of Sir Anton Dolin's *Last Words* and John Gilpin's *A Dance with Life*

In his fast-moving novella, *Death in Damascus*, Adam Darius keeps us all on our toes from the moment two strangers meet in what at first seems like a casual encounter. Separate lives begin to intertwine. Sexuality in its different forms is examined, with one of the characters' compulsion to kill depicted against an international background of on and offstage rivalries and human dilemmas.

Of course, the word `novella´ immediately made me think of another highly successful novella, *Death in Venice*, by Thomas Mann. *Death in Damascus* by Adam Darius is far more sophisticated, perhaps inevitably, for attitudes have changed with the times, though emotions remain the same.

The world of dance is a microcosm of the universe, with its physical and mental torments, escapism, subterfuge and loves and hates. What it is not, as *Death in Damascus* reveals to the uninitiated, is merely a series of pretty boys in tights cavorting with anorexic girls. But you don't have to be a balletomane to be gripped by this adventure.

## Chapter One

### Echoing Footsteps

The year was 2005, as Dieter Johnson would vividly recall.

He was one of the last visitors to the souk el-Hamidye in Damascus, most of the shops having already been gated and closed for the night. A little earlier in the evening, he had arrived at the airport from Germany where he was the director and principal choreographer of the Dresdner Staatsoper und Ballett.

Going through customs, the unavoidable millstone around every traveller's neck, his pale blue eyes were in defined contrast with his café au lait coloured skin, a study in polarized mixed genes from his blonde German mother and African-American father.

He was used to being stared at, his blended racial heritage reminding aesthetically inclined people of a pale wood African mask. Sensitive people aside, the ordinary man on the street frequently saw him as an imminent threat, inciting the narrow-eyed glares of ill-disguised prejudice. Dieter didn't have to be a mind reader to know what some people were thinking when he sat next to them on public transport, a plane or in a restaurant.

Within the confines of the dance world, thanks to the likes of such courage-infused pioneers as Katherine Dunham, Janet Collins and Alvin Ailey, combined colour was taken for granted, but outside the studio and theatre, ill feelings often hung heavy in the air.

Due to the lateness of the hour and the complete thinning out of the crowd, Dieter felt conspicuous as a last-minute shopper. The souk had become silenced with most locals having returned to their homes and most tourists, unfolded maps in hand, having found their way back to their hotels.

With the pungent odour of the still open spice market seeming sharper than ever as he stood beside it, he bought a few exotic spices for his lovely wife, Birgit, who, when she wasn't dancing in the company, relaxed by cooking. Their three young children were already selective in their knowledge of international cuisine. Dieter paid the owner who, though he was pleased to make such a last-minute transaction, seemed even more pleased that he could now close up for the night and get home to his wife and many children.

Just as Dieter started to walk away, he heard footsteps closely behind him, then abruptly stopping. He hesitated a few seconds then resumed walking. Once more, the footsteps canonically echoed his own, and when he stopped, the footsteps ceased to reverberate in the shadowy and winding alleys.

Someone who had remained in the souk was now trailing him and waiting for the opportune moment to make an appearance. Dieter's first thoughts were for his money bag in which he had secured his German passport, euros, mobile, keys and bank cards.

He accelerated his walk towards what he hoped was an exit, for the souk, much smaller than the one in Istanbul, was still something of a maze. Now the footsteps became less cautious and more brazen.

In those split seconds of self-protection that spring to mind when one feels mortally threatened, Dieter decided that when his stalker momentarily confronted him, he would use a martial arts high kick to his face, in that way incapacitating him. Those Bruce Lee styled lessons he once took from a Chinese master were now going to come to his rescue.

Dieter turned his head suddenly and saw a young man almost directly behind him. To his surprise, he didn't look at all threatening. Rather than some sinister character from the recesses of one's fears, he observed at once that his

“follower” was in his late 20s, not particularly of Arabic appearance, and very good-looking.

Breathing an inner sigh of relief that his money and other valuables were not about to be stolen, he sensed an alternative reason for the cat and mouse game that had just taken place. He was being cruised. But having grown up in the ballet world, he was accustomed to being, if not mistaken for gay, then considered a potential conquest, a greater sexual trophy than if he had been immediately sexually accessible.

“Hello,” his shadow in the souk addressed him with a flashing smile, revealing a set of toothpaste-advertisement teeth, a chiselled jaw line, and almost sculptured cheekbones. One didn’t have to be gay to see that the young man in front of him was outstandingly attractive. Well built, he seemed just less than six feet tall.

“Where are you from?” the stranger asked him, his charm still laser-beamed in Dieter’s direction.

“I’m from Germany,” he answered tentatively, surprising himself that he was so forthcoming. Maybe, he thought inwardly, he was relatively obliging since his money bag didn’t seem as if it was about to be snatched.

“My name is Zafir al-Ziad,” the no longer stranger disclosed. “What’s yours?”

Hesitating for a fraction of a second, Dieter chose to throw caution to the winds and told him the truth.

“My name is Dieter Johnson.” Zafir smiled and shook his hand.

“Can I offer you a cup of coffee?” Zafir inquired, determined to extend the thus far very brief encounter.

“There’s a café still open and it’s very nearby.”

“Well,” Dieter thought, “I have a choice of going back to the non-descript, sapped of soul hotel room or chatting for some minutes with this apparently pleasant young fellow.”

“Would I be trespassing,” Zafir asked, “if I inquire as to

your ethnic background?" By hook or by crook, he was determined to prolong the conversation.

"No," Dieter countered, "I don't mind your question at all. Since you ask, my father was an African-American soldier and my mother a pretty, blonde German girl, just turned 20. They met while he was stationed in Dresden; they married, I was born, they divorced and then he left to go back to America. There, in a nutshell, is my hybrid heritage."

The conversation had inched along, at Zafir's instigation, to the personal, and though Dieter no longer felt endangered, he was very aware that he had to get up early tomorrow morning to rehearse his ballet, *Faces of Evil*. His German dancers had already arrived a few days ago and all of them would have to prepare the ballet on the tightest time schedule.

"Zafir, I don't mean to be rude, but this coffee interlude has to be very brief since I have to be up bright and early tomorrow morning for work."

"Would I be stepping out of line if I ask you what kind of work?"

Obeying some impulse to be open, Dieter replied, "I have to rehearse my ballet *Faces of Evil*. It's being presented at the Dar al-Assad Opera House and I'm the choreographer. And, since you're going to ask me next, I'll jump the gun by telling you that I'm the director of the Dresden State Opera Ballet."

"I knew you were a dancer," Zafir exclaimed with delight. "So am I, and I'm also a choreographer. What a coincidence!" With those biographical details revealed, he looked at Dieter as if they were long separated blood brothers.

"Well, Zafir, if you haven't cottoned on already, I'm here with some members of my company for the Damascus Performing Arts Festival."

For better or for worse, a common denominator had been unexpectedly struck.

“More coincidences! I’m also going to appear at the Festival,” enthused Zafir. “In fact, I’m dancing a solo of mine called *Symbols* at the opening tomorrow night.”

As they walked to the café of Zafir’s choice, Dieter wondered if he had inadvertently emitted the wrong signals. Though his fellow man had absolutely no appeal for him in a sexual sense, he liked people and made no exclusion zone if they ignited his curiosity, or if he found them interesting on an intellectual or emotional level.

He was secure enough in his own heterosexuality to be oblivious to the preponderance of gay colleagues at the theatre. How could it be otherwise in the ballet world? Still, he knew he had to be careful that he didn’t give any false encouragement to Zafir.

They sat down at the café table, pulled in the chairs and then ordered two cups of coffee, both with generous dollops of cream. Dieter had already made up his mind to pay for Zafir, as he didn’t want to feel beholden to him for the negligible price of two coffees.

“What have you choreographed?” Dieter asked him with curiosity, though he began to feel slightly uncomfortable at the proximity of Zafir’s chair to his own. A second later he dismissed the thought as he had already noticed at the airport that, in this culture, men walked arm in arm as a sign of togetherness, not at all sexual.

As if reading Dieter’s mind, Zafir slid his chair a few inches away then proudly answered, “A few years back I formed my own small troupe called *Taamulat*.”

“Which means?” inquired Dieter.

“In Arabic, that means *reflections* in the sense of one contemplating or thinking deeply about something. We had a lot of success with my ballets *The Winds of Time*, *Voyage of the Soul* and *The Moon is Ruby Red*.”

“All very poetic and even spiritual titles,” commented Dieter.

The young man before him, Dieter surmised, had something to offer, a spark or two, or maybe more, on the back burner waiting to be lifted to full flame. But, ever aware of the lateness of the hour, Dieter knew he was giving too much of his time to him as his watch moved closer to midnight.

He wished he was back in his hotel, the five-star Cham Palace on Maysaloun Street. “What on earth am I doing socializing,” he berated himself, when he knew he should have been preparing his notes for the all-important rehearsal tomorrow. He hoped that upon meeting the technical staff at the theatre, they would be sufficiently fluent in English to be able to understand his requirements, and that if they weren’t, he’d be provided with an interpreter equally at home in both Arabic and English.

His thoughts crowding each other out with the next day’s responsibilities, he fingered his gold wedding ring as a nervous outlet, as Arab men do their worry beads.

Though Dieter had been married fourteen years and was now 45, he never wandered, for he belonged to that atypical minority of men who find fulfillment in one woman, even after the initial frisson of attraction has subsided.

“I always knew I wanted to dance,” Zafir confided, happy to have so accidentally come across the likes of the Dresden ballet director. But feeling Dieter’s desire to pay the bill and leave, Zafir’s rhythm of speech gathered speed so that he wouldn’t be cut off by the imminent and unavoidable goodnight.

“Growing up in a culture where dancing for men is regarded as a peculiar career choice, there was more than prejudice, there was and is outright condemnation. You’re labelled and only when I wander through the late night souk,

can I sometimes come across a sympathetic foreigner with whom I can talk. Like you.”

“Where did you learn to speak English so fluently?” asked Dieter.

“Well, my father was guest professor of mathematics at Yale for three years, so he transplanted the whole family to Connecticut during that period. I was twelve years old then, and by the time we returned to Syria I was fifteen.”

“To your credit, your English is more than fluent, it’s idiomatic and colloquial, almost as if it’s your mother tongue.”

“Well, that’s a real compliment coming from you and I thank you for it.”

Zafir was, admittedly, charming company, but Dieter had stayed far longer than he had expected to, so when the bill arrived, he grabbed it and said goodnight.

“Can’t we meet tomorrow?” Zafir interjected, his disappointment clouding his handsome face. “I would love to watch you rehearse and, if your schedule permits, I would also like you to see my *own* group.”

When Dieter hesitated, Zafir repeated his request, this time with more urgency. Looking at the young man, so needful of both artistic and personal contact, Dieter saw, not a gay man on the make, but a human being almost pleading for help. He did not feel threatened in any sense, for having mentioned his wife and children, he had made it clear to the young Syrian that he was unavailable.

“Yes, we can meet tomorrow at 10 a.m., in the lobby of the Cham Palace.”

“Dieter, *shookran, shookran*, thank you so very much. This really means a lot to me. And I know it will to my fiancée as well. She dances in my company.”

“Fiancée?” registered a quizzical Dieter, noting Zafir’s transparent conformist stance.

A short walk later along still flickering neon-lit streets, Dieter passed through the security of the revolving doors of

the hotel, its lobby almost empty of any visitors. The day time staff had been replaced by the minimal late night shift, none of whom at this hour made any effort to be outgoing.

Collecting his key from the counter, he took the elevator to the third floor. Then, to enliven the drab and interchangeable uniformity of the hotel room, he switched on the television but almost as quickly turned it off. Mind-deadening programmes as usual, but over and above the lacklustre fare, his mind returned to Zafir. Personable he certainly was, but beneath his harmonious features, Dieter sensed a young man who, when not dancing, courted danger, the risk factor enabling him to equal the high he managed to achieve when on stage.

For after all, it was Zafir's pre-midnight cruising that had brought them together, if not, as it turned out, for sex in a darkened doorway, but, unexpectedly, for exploring the art of ballet in its brief and addictive spotlight.

## Chapter Two

### Narcissus in Blue Jeans

At 10 a.m., true to his word, Zafir was waiting for him in the lobby. Attired in tight, faded jeans and an orange open-necked long-sleeved shirt, he sported a gold medallion that glittered across his bare throat and hairless chest. Around his neck he had thrown a vibrant violet-coloured scarf, all emphasizing his casual but carefully arranged effect. He was, as Dieter could see, a Syrian Narcissus in American blue jeans.

Dieter also observed that Zafir greeted and was warmly greeted by several members of the hotel staff, both male and female, all brimming with efficiency behind the counter.

How much, if anything, did they know of his nocturnal activities? Whatever they knew or didn't know, the staff enjoyed their proximity to him, for Zafir was on the periphery of show business idols. He was stared at, though unlike top rock musicians, he hadn't yet achieved the stratospheric status of being hero-worshipped.

In the flash of a revelation, Dieter saw in Zafir's harmonious features the invitation to oblivion, for no less than a fleeting rainbow or fluttering butterfly, Zafir's beauty was inexorably condemned to extinction. His was the tragedy of perfection.

No, Dieter was quick to reject his own dire prognosis. Of course, once a physical pinnacle has been attained, there is only one direction to go, and that is down. But such an inevitability in no way implied that Zafir was doomed. He would just age like everyone else.

There are, though, Dieter understood, exceptions among obsessively cultivated physical specimens such as Yukio Mishima. The prolific Japanese writer, Dieter knew, avoided the decomposition of ravenous time by committing hara-kiri

at the peak of his own flowering, the age of 45. Contrary to Mishima, Dieter, the same age as he was at his spectacular death, had neither desire nor intention to exit the world, for he accepted, albeit with reluctance, nature's ultimate and gloating victory.

Zafir stood there, smiling at Dieter, grateful that he had been invited to watch him in action at the opera house. Dieter, while shaking Zafir's hand, beheld in his flawless features a forewarning of loss, for such a gift as Zafir was blessed with was also cursed, a ball of fire tossed between God and the devil.

Snapping out of his oppressive reverie, Dieter walked with Zafir to the street where there was a line of waiting taxis. Squeezing into the first one, they drove to the new Dar al-Assad opera house in front of which stood a massive multi-coloured glass sculpture, a sky-piercing symbol of modernity in the midst of the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

"All foreign visitors," Zafir offered, "are pleasantly surprised to find such a new opera house in the city of Damascus. Our fraught relations with our neighbours Lebanon and Israel constantly fill the international newspapers, but rarely are there any reports of Syria's abundant cultural activities."

"As usual," commented Dieter, "the world media focuses on death and destruction rather than on life and creation."

Zafir, with the permission of the stage doorman, and familiar with the labyrinthine corridors of the opera house, led Dieter to the rehearsal studio. There, the ten German dancers were ready for their choreographer, all of them either stretching on the floor or loosening up at the barre. At first sight of Dieter, all of them stopped what they were doing to warmly welcome him. They greeted him, not as a feared martinet upon whom their livelihoods depended, but as a

long lost friend, though they had seen each other only days earlier in Dresden.

*“Hallo Dieter! Schön dich zu sehen! Herzlich willkommen! Wie geht’s?”*

Glancing at Zafir, they pondered momentarily over his identity, not least since he had arrived with Dieter at the start of a working day. One of the principal male dancers, Helmut, himself a banner-waving gay rights activist, shot a quick glance at his director with a questioning glint in his eye, conjecturing if during the previous night the border of sexual allegiance had been crossed.

If it had, which he didn’t really believe, then Dieter had good taste, for he, himself, found Zafir at once desirable. Helmut wasted no time in fixing his attentions on the sexually charged Syrian, staring at him for longer than conventional assessments permit. But Zafir paid no heed to his unsubtle message, for his interest was otherwise engaged, namely in the direction of the virile Italian dancer, Pierluigi. The Italian, with a profile straight out of a Renaissance painting, was doing last minute push-ups on the floor. Frustratingly for Zafir, Pierluigi, who barely needed to snap his fingers for a woman’s submission, showed zero interest in the Syrian’s overture at conversation.

None of these lightning quick interchanges of need escaped Dieter who then and there understood that Zafir was not attracted to overtly gay men like Helmut, but to macho specimens such as Pierluigi with whom, he knew, he stood little if any chance.

Zafir, Dieter thought, could believably have stepped out of an illustrated edition of *The Arabian Nights*.

Such a striking figure as he was, there was no question that he would be the subject of speculation, item number one in the company’s communal chitchat. For dancers love to gossip, Dieter well understood, a harmless outlet that detours the mind from recurring injuries, resentments towards others

seemingly favoured, the ingrained habit of excessive self-criticism, failed and failing romances, and, subliminally present at all times, the awareness of the diminishing number of years left before enforced retirement.

Dieter had long enjoyed a good relationship with his company, for, unlike so many other ballet directors, he related to the dancers as adults, not as children in mature bodies. Principal opera singers, musicians and actors, he had for years witnessed at first hand, would never put up with the degrading and minimizing treatment meted out to dancers by their respective managements. Dieter knew this from his own personal experience, having earlier in his career danced in companies in Lyons, Vienna and Milan. The difference in those days between the self-esteem of the opera singers and ballet dancers was as far distant as the north pole to the south pole, as the sublime and rhapsodic music of Puccini to the spatial and electronic music of Stockhausen.

A ballet company is not a kindergarten, Dieter believed with conviction. Being related to as overgrown children or, at best, adolescents, takes its toll so that even at the end of their brief careers, the conversations of the older dancers reflect mostly their helpless sense of defeatism, spoon-fed by the management so as to make space for the impatient young aspirants. Rarely, if ever, did one hear emotionally downtrodden dancers of any age discussing current events or earth-altering political edicts.

As for the dancers over 40, to hear snippets of their conversations in the Dresden opera house canteen, one would think the world outside was non-existent. How they circled round and round in their own despondency, as wobbly as lone suitcases on a deserted airport carousel.

Dieter had managed to avoid such pessimism due to his belief in his own potential value. He had very early determined that as he got older he would not be discarded

as bruised vegetables at the end of the day in a supermarket. The stubborn streak in him, forged by his having fought and survived racism all along the route, made him resolve to continue his career in the dance world when faceless bureaucrats, scanning his birth date, decided he was past his sell-by date.

Why, he asked himself, acutely disgruntled, should he be thrown out when other men his age in their late 30s and early 40s were just beginning to scale the heights? He was, he reminded himself, no Senegal slave, shackled across the ocean, to be bartered on a South Carolina auction block, and then appraised only for his black bulging biceps.

There are positives and negatives in everyone's nature, he clearly understood, and how you expand the virtues and disband the defects help determine the texture of one's journey. There were other factors in one's circumstances of which no one had control, such as when and where you were born. He was fortunate, he knew, to have been born in the right place at the right time, a relatively prosperous Germany no longer ravaged by war.

He was also fortunate, he appreciated, that he had been trained by such balletic luminaries as Anatole Vilzak and Pierre Vladimirov, two of Diaghilev's principal male dancers, they at the end of their careers, he at the beginning of his own. Later on, among the formidable women who helped contour his artistic identity were Vera Volkova in Copenhagen and Marika Besobrasova in Monte Carlo.

Such tutelage with instructors at that level had instilled in him not only entrenched technique but, more importantly, inspiration and untarnished ideals.

His dancers ready at the barre, Dieter had devised a class that would warm them up, but not deplete them of their resources for the intensive rehearsal ahead. From *grand plié* at the beginning to *grand battement* at the end, the barre work was sequential in its anatomical demands, with varying

speeds and always incorporating the fluidity that is the hallmark of the finest Russian inheritance.

The centre work progressed from a long sustained adagio incorporating *attitudes* and *arabesques* reminiscent of medieval Italian sculpture, to small steps of elevation leading to larger ones that traversed the entire studio. An hour and a quarter later, the class ended in the traditional manner, the girls curtsying and the boys bowing to their teacher, a courtly conclusion emanating from the classic ballet's royal French lineage.

The pianist, with a sudden cramp in his leg from having sat still in one place for so long, stood up to stretch his legs, while the dancers, moist, dripping and drenched, grabbed their towels to pat and dry their sweating bodies.

"Relax for a quarter of an hour, have some refreshments and then we'll go right into the rehearsal," Dieter told them. They all had the warmest feelings for him, for they knew their director to be a caring person and, moreover, because he was their ever present life provider. It was he who enabled them to eat, thereby nourishing their bodies and, most essentially, he enabled them to dance, thereby nourishing their souls.

Dieter then took Zafir aside and walked with him to the furthest corner of the studio bench. Though completely attentive during the class, he noticed that the Syrian dancer had had an expression of inscrutability. But the Sphinx-like countenance was soon replaced by the specifics of his thought process, for instead of having absorbed the experience so as to expand his view of virgin vistas, he began to compare the class to his own limited training. He didn't seem to register that what he had seen in Dieter's teaching was a distillation of the Vaganova heritage from Russia, the Bournonville legacy from Denmark, as well as the Cecchetti method from Italy, the most fruitful fusion of the pre-eminent European schools.

“My teacher,” Zafir spurt out, “taught *battement frappé* this way, my teacher did pirouettes with the foot in a high *retiré*, not lower as you taught it.” And so he continued to comparatively evaluate, unable to absorb the class as a new and challenging experience. He had just been exposed to the rich inheritance of the art of ballet, but something in his psyche prevented him from such assimilation.

Dieter was disappointed that the class Zafir had just seen seemed to make little if any impression on him. The young and serious Syrian dancer seemed locked in his own private world, a world that yearned to expand but restricted any infiltration from even well-meaning strangers bearing gifts.

“Zafir,” Dieter said kindly, “don’t dwell on the class. It’s over. Now you’re welcome to watch the rehearsal.” With that added invitation, he smiled at his guest and pointed to a chair placed in the corner of the studio.

Dieter’s ballet *Faces of Evil* probed the theme of crime and punishment. This was a subject close to Dieter’s own growing-up experiences due to his mixed racial background. A Jew, even in once Nazi Germany, could, with deception, escape the pointed finger of prejudice, but not so the black man. Even if half white, as he was, he was always perceived as black.

The rehearsal went smoothly and when Dieter got back to the Cham Palace, he wolfed down a shrimp salad then hurriedly went to his room where he showered and changed his clothes. Selecting a shantung navy blue suit, white shirt and silk turquoise tie, he met his dancers in the lobby and together they hailed three taxis to take them to the opening of the Festival.

Dieter was curious to see if Zafir, to be prominently featured, was a concoction of self-belief mushroomed into belligerence or, possibly, a true talent in dire need of direction. Equally curious by now were Dieter’s dancers, for

they couldn't help but notice that their director had already given an excess of his precious time to this untested but staggeringly beautiful young man.

Aside from his stunning good looks, did this visitor truly merit all this attention? That was the question that once answered would dispel all speculation.

## Chapter Three

### Camouflage

It was a packed theatre that marked the opening of the Festival, with a generous sprinkling of Syrian glitterati in attendance. Dieter was sitting among his dancers, the men and women attired casually, but all looking very smart. How could they not with their worked bodies, absence of any excess flesh, and elongated posture?

There was an air of expectancy in the audience as the house lights gradually dimmed to black. As overlapping shafts of light began to illuminate the stage, Zafir appeared in jade green tights that ended below the knees and a T-shirt cut down the middle to reveal most of his torso. The moment he began to dance his solo *Symbols*, his multitude of admirers afforded him a rousing welcome.

Immediately in evidence to Dieter was Zafir's defined and dynamic stage personality, projecting to the upper balconies of the opera house. Zafir shone effortlessly like one of those spectrum-coloured, tasselled lanterns sold in the souk. Of this there was no doubt as he lit up the surroundings.

At first, Dieter began to respond to Zafir's Broadway-styled projection, influenced by the likes of musical comedy choreographer Bob Fosse. But Dieter's reactions began to be tempered by the young Syrian dancer's apparent delight in being at the absolute centre of attention, rather than submerging himself, as he should have been, in the mood of the chosen piece.

As if Zafir sensed that the audience needed a sharper crack of the whip, he pulled out of his bag of tricks a favourite party piece, proceeding to bounce up and down repeatedly on his bare toes. While subjecting his feet to such punishment, he thirstily drank in the circus-type

applause that followed. Dieter, watching the masochistic display, winced and grimaced in the dark.

Dieter, still flinching, found this trick an invitation to physical injury as well as artistically grating. Mercifully going back to dancing on *demi-pointe* and the flat of his feet, Zafir was now in full stride and reached the end of *Symbols* in a burst of climactic energy.

If the dance had any meaning, it escaped Dieter, but what did not elude him was what Zafir displayed as he manipulated his lithe body across the stage. Moving from the borderline of exciting jazz, his dancing began to expose his hidden self, the very core of his own identity, but already made known to Dieter on a one to one basis in the pre-midnight souk.

Zafir's manner of moving his pelvic area, so predominant in good Broadway choreography, had slipped from energetic jazz into camp gyrations, a handsome male ill-concealing his actual libido.

If movement can serve as a lie detector, Zafir had unintentionally told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. What he disclosed was not, in Dieter's view, any crime whatsoever; rather it was a manifestation of his inner self. As Dieter believed, Zafir's sexuality belonged to *him*, as did his fingerprints. It was his own business.

Nevertheless, for Zafir, it wasn't so simple as a take it or leave it attitude. From their first meeting in the souk, he seemed to regard his sexuality as something to be kept undercover at all costs. His fears, one had to concede, were not without foundation, for, after all, he was not living and working in New York, London or Paris where few seemed to blink an eyelash at non-conformist personalities.

Following the last sound of sustained applause, with only a minute's pause, Zafir's group *Taamulat* began to dance his much discussed ensemble piece, *Euthanasia*.

This was a most noteworthy attempt to tackle the highly contentious subject of curtailing a life before its natural end, of choosing to put a terminally ill person out of his misery by setting a specific date and time for death. Illegal in most countries, due to its moral, religious and legal ramifications, its brave and elevated theme struck Dieter as wholly admirable when he read the programme note.

But once the curtain had risen, he was somewhat deflated by Zafir's absence of taste, for in his treatment the controversial theme of euthanasia had turned into a flimsy excuse for choreography that had nothing whatsoever to do with the subject. If one didn't know the title of the work, the action could have been taking place, not in a hospital ward, as intended, but at a reunion party for long separated class mates. One *pas de trois*, in particular, between two "doctors" and a "patient" bordered on the acrobatic, its inappropriate soundtrack the sensual voice of Madonna.

Further detaching Dieter was the fact that Zafir, among his barefoot dancers, had put one of the girls, as the head nurse, on *pointe* when she had absolutely no instep, arch or training to be handed such a responsibility. All Dieter could think of as he watched her on stage was the outmoded Chinese tradition of binding women's feet, causing them to hobble for the rest of their lives.

How could Zafir embarrass both knowledgeable viewers and, above all, himself by allowing this? Had he never seen, if not live, any videos of great dancers? Surely he must have viewed on DVD's the likes of Ulanova, Plisetskaya or Fonteyn.

Dieter wished he could have been enthusiastic, he wished he could have shouted a bravo. Was he, he asked himself, being too severe in his response to Zafir's efforts? After all, it was no small achievement to get a group together, to scrounge around for the funding necessary for rehearsal studios, costumes, the design and printing of

souvenir programmes, newspaper advertisements and, the biggest expense of all, theatre rental. As for salaries, the group was happy to work for nothing, their day jobs paying their bills.

Dieter had to and did give full credit to Zafir's ever present obstacle of trying to dance in the desert. For though they were not literally dancing barefoot on hot sands, they were struggling, in a similar vein, to keep a dance company intact.

All small dance groups are familiar with the begging bowl, always extended in unceasing urgency so that a company can continue to exist. Dieter knew from his own earlier experience that to keep a dance group afloat takes the most stubborn and persistent of temperaments. And in Syria, even more so since the tradition of serious dance was relatively new compared to their long tradition of the art of drama.

Zafir's small group of dancers, Dieter had found out, consisted of an ad hoc assemblage of exiled Iraqis, displaced Palestinians and local Syrians, though the latter were in a minority. On stage, they were something of a ragbag collection with a minimum of technique, but an abundance of fervor. They all had youth on their side, while their olive-skinned attractiveness and strong need to express themselves in movement compensated, to a degree, for an almost complete lack of technique in any school of movement. The single exception in appearance and technique was a fair-haired young lady who did not appear at all Middle Eastern.

*Euthanasia* concluded and was met, despite the somberness of the theme, by an enthusiastic response, for Zafir apparently could do no wrong as far as his adoring fan club was concerned. The decibel level of applause, already strong, lifted considerably when Zafir was thrust forward by his group to bask solo in the limelight.

At the party afterwards, Zafir sought Dieter out and then introduced him to the young lady by his side, an English dancer in his troupe named Patricia Andrews. She was, Dieter recognized, the fair-haired girl in the group, by far the best trained of his dancers.

“Patricia is my fiancée,” he stated with a certain pride to Dieter, seeming to enjoy the slight confusion he gleaned in the black German’s expression. During Zafir’s introduction, Patricia smiled at Dieter with a charm and deferential politeness seemingly ingrained in all English ballet girls.

How many people, Dieter conjectured, did Zafir think were taken in by such a camouflage? Evidently, she was his security zone, his cover in a society that brooked no blatant public departure from the conventional.

“What brought you to Damascus, may I ask?” inquired Dieter of the young dancer, appraising her as no more than 21.

“I was participating in a ballet competition in Kyoto,” she explained, “the same competition that Zafir had entered. We became friendly and when he mentioned his own group in Damascus, I was interested at once. You see, there’s so much competition throughout the UK, that few dancers, even the best ones, can get work.”

Why, puzzled Dieter inwardly, did such an extremely pretty young lady whose dancing had struck him as having an uncommon life force, even moments of poetry, know so much rejection? Was there possibly another reason that she wasn’t divulging?

Abruptly changing course and not mincing his words, Dieter asked Zafir, “If I’m not prying, when are you planning to get married?”

“There’s no date yet and there’s no rush,” Zafir evasively answered, brushing aside the query that threatened his pretence. Patricia, in the few seconds of Zafir’s response, looked decidedly ill at ease, for she was fully aware of her safeguard place in his life.

In a society that didn't allow men and women to cohabit unless they were married, Zafir had his insurance policy at the ready. As long as he was engaged, he was safe from the pointing fingers and accusatory tongues of officialdom.

## Chapter Four

### Faces of Evil

On the second evening of the Festival, the 4th February 2005, Dieter Johnson's most acknowledged ballet, *Faces of Evil*, was given its Syrian premiere. This was the work that had launched his international career as a choreographer, the ballet that had set him into orbit, opening the doors to some of Europe's major opera houses.

In a much discussed live interview on Syrian State Television, preceding the premiere of the work, the distinguished interviewer Khaled al-Mallah spoke to the visiting choreographer.

"In all frankness, Dieter Johnson, would you say that your own struggle to be accepted as a ranking ballet choreographer was more difficult than for your white contemporaries?"

"Yes, for no opera house management, I had been warned repeatedly, would accept a classical work from a black choreographer. If you're African-American and a choreographer, or African-German as I am, you're expected to deliver works in the style of Alvin Ailey or Ulysses Dove. To work in the style of Balanchine or Ashton, non-whites are suspect. Managements will deny this until they're blue in the face, but such is the politically incorrect reality for blacks.

As a dancing example, until the black Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta joined Britain's Royal Ballet, that most prestigious of companies never had a resident black principal. A black Romeo? Forget it, but Carlos never did forget it and now he's also a black Spartacus, not only for the Royal, but also the Bolshoi."

"What, then, Mr. Johnson, was the turning point in your own career?"

“It was my ballet, *Faces of Evil*, atypical for a ballet in that it confronted head-on a sociological issue. Very gradually, almost imperceptibly, major European opera houses began to disregard my colour and accept me for what I had to offer as an artist. I would like to add that though my present ballets are neither pure classical nor re-workings of the classics, I have, nevertheless, maintained the utmost respect for tradition.”

“Mr. Johnson, considering your high regard for classical ballet, why didn’t you continue to choreograph at least neo-classical works?”

“Because, I, myself, as a black man travelling in a predominantly white world, couldn’t merely choreograph harmonious patterns. I had to share with an audience the concerns that allowed me no interior peace. Such issues break the boundaries of convenient categories, but if I have to have a label attached, then perhaps you could describe my work as dramatic explorations.”

“When I think, Mr. Johnson, of creative artists who have explored the conflict between good and evil, Russian authors such as Dostoyevski and Tolstoy come to mind, not German/American choreographers such as yourself.”

“I don’t think writers have a monopoly on investigating the seeds of evil. The sociological issues are what’s relevant, not my identification tag as choreographer.”

“The investigation of evil, I have found, is an unnerving experience. There were times, Mr. al-Mallah, when I felt as if I had been, to use a medieval analogy, wrestling with the devil in hell.

“Monsters who commit heinous crimes are an ugly breed apart. No country is exempt from producing such horrific killers, demons who have fouled the human landscape.”

“One final question, if I may. Over and above ballet’s entertainment value, how do you define its larger significance?”

“I, myself, see dance as a cry against extinction, an intense manifestation of life’s brief summer.”

“Thank you, Dieter Johnson, for your most probing insights.”

The interview over, Dieter went straight to the theatre to see the performance of his work. When the ballet ended, Dieter made his way to the bar of the opera house where he had arranged to meet Zafir and Patricia. Going out on a limb, for he sensed what he was about to hear, Dieter asked Zafir what he received from watching the performance of *Faces of Evil*.

Without hesitation, Zafir began to hammer away at the work, the same work that had elicited rave reviews from influential critics in Europe and the same work that the interviewer Khaled al-Mallah had responded to with such keen interest.

Zafir began to explain to Dieter how *he* would have treated the theme had he been the choreographer. Again, the distasteful egocentricity of his way of thinking precluded his appreciation of anyone else’s work, even the most acclaimed.

No aspect of the ballet seemed to find favour with him, not the scenario, not the choreography, score or even the dancing whose German cast had immersed themselves in their roles with such total conviction. What had thrilled audiences at the Maryinsky and Paris Opera left Zafir cold, so exclusive was his self-perception, so blinkered was his over-inflated ego, an ego grossly out of proportion to his limited experience and present body of works.

Patricia was visibly squirming as she listened to Zafir dissecting the magnum opus of a mature guest artist. If she could have stopped him from continuing to speak, she would have clamped her hand over his mouth, so did Dieter sense her growing discomfort.

Dieter, too, was puzzled, for never ever would he have dreamt in his 20s of dissecting the work of a much older artist,

face to face, and one who was among the A-list choreographers of Europe.

Finally, he stopped Zafir who seemed incapable of calling a halt to his runaway tongue. He told him that his tirade was merely confirmation of what he had already anticipated.

“Why then,” asked Zafir, now hot under the collar, “did you let me go on like this?”

“I believe in giving people the freedom to air their own thoughts, even if those thoughts are less than flattering to me, personally.”

“Oh, I’m so embarrassed. I didn’t mean to step on your toes, so to speak.”

“You haven’t, Zafir, for I gave you carte blanche to speak your mind and that’s exactly what you did. Everyone’s entitled to their own point of view.”

Patricia looked at Dieter with a newfound respect, for she understood in his response a tolerance beyond the call of duty. In her previous experience in England, any choreographers she knew would have made short shrift of Zafir’s tactless and negative critique.

That evening Dieter had learned something unpleasant, even self-destructive, about Zafir. His undoubted charm, cover boy looks and talent notwithstanding, he had a perverse ability to antagonize even those who were earlier his admirers.

Dieter was unable to understand such a gargantuan self-image in one so young and untested. But he was most curious to know how, living in the perpetually troubled Middle East, Zafir could remain so oblivious to the blood, agony and death surrounding him. Why did he not seem to feel any affinity with the subject matter of injustice? Where was his empathy with the downtrodden?

“When you were in school, in your European history lessons, did they teach you about the French Revolution?” Dieter asked him.

“Oh yes,” affirmed Zafir, “they went into some detail.”

“Then you’re aware of that most tragic queen, Marie Antoinette, who suffered the misfortune of being married to the wrong king in the wrong country at the wrong time.”

“Yes,” I *do* know who she was,” Zafir conceded, but Dieter wondered if his awareness went any further than the apocryphal retort of ‘Let them eat cake.’

“During the time of the French Revolution,” Dieter went on, “in the midst of the blood-drenched delirium that had swept across Paris, among the victims was Queen Marie Antoinette’s friend, the Princesse de Lamballe. The Princess met the most horrendous of deaths, felled by hammer blows to her head, then possibly still alive, was sexually violated. The frenzy unabated, her breasts and genitalia were then hacked off.”

“What a stomach-churning story!” Zafir said in a barely audible voice.

“Further horror variants were heard by many people in Paris,” Dieter went on, “that her corpse had been ripped open and her heart cooked and eaten. What is beyond question, however, is that her internal organs, along with her head, were mounted on pikes where they were paraded in front of the prison where the Queen and her family were being held captive.”

“Such a gruesome story!” exclaimed Zafir with a slight shudder, “but what has such a dreadful death got to do with *me*?”

“All areas of life, including its most repellent aspects, are part of your repository to draw upon as a creative artist. But first and foremost, a developed human being must have a full reservoir of compassion.”

Dieter wanted Zafir to understand that, in his view, it is the mission of the artist to shed light on otherwise darkened areas, to try to de-mystify the unfathomable journey of all our huddled lives, to speak up even in the face of smirking death.

“Think, Zafir, about the nature of evil. Would you say it flourishes in the absence of enforced restraint?”

“To be perfectly frank, Dieter, I never really asked myself such a question,” admitted Zafir.

“Well, maybe now’s a good time to do so. And while we’re at it, I’d like to know if you think God-believers behave ethically only for fear of a posthumous punishment? Or, conversely, do they do good deeds only for the hope of present reward?”

“If I could answer those questions, I’d be teaching philosophy at the University of Damascus.”

“One final query, Zafir,” added Dieter, lightening his tone of approach. “What about atheists who’ve rejected what they consider the fictions of theology? How do *they* fit into the scheme of things regarding *their* behaviour?”

“Dieter, I have enough difficulty getting through a performance without landing on my backside, and now you’re asking me to solve the riddles of the universe!”

“No, I’m not,” said Dieter chuckling, “I just want you to put on your thinking cap and keep it there. *Faces of Evil* approaches these issues, though I certainly make no claim to resolving such enigmas.”

Zafir then hurriedly glanced at his watch and said that he hadn’t realized how the time had flown, for he had an appointment very early the next morning with the critic, Fahad Hassan. He had to get back to his apartment, he explained, to prepare the points he wanted to make at the meeting. With that, he bade a quick goodbye to both Patricia and Dieter.

“Good luck with that man tomorrow and, for goodness sake, don’t say anything you might later regret,” advised Patricia, knowing full well that her prudent counsel would fall on deaf ears.

“I thank you both for your advice,” answered Zafir, “and I’ll do my best to stay on the straight and narrow.”

Dieter smiled at Zafir as he walked towards the door, impressed by his retentive grasp of colloquial English. Zafir had barely left the room, his personal warmth still pervading the atmosphere, but Dieter was more aware than ever of blinking red warning lights.

## Chapter Five

### Confrontation

“Come in, Zafir, and take a seat.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hassan.”

“Now, Zafir, let’s dispense with the formalities and get straight to the point.”

“That’s exactly what I want to do as well.”

“Tell me, whatever possessed you to write such a critical open letter to *Syria Today* about my review of your ballet?”

“Well, why not? You roasted me over the coals, so to speak, why shouldn’t I do the same to you? People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

“But Zafir, people who put themselves on the firing line, and all public figures do, should be expected to be shot at.”

“Why, I don’t understand, is it all right for me to be publicly torn apart, then dissected by you, but not all right for me to defend myself?”

In his agitated state, the points Zafir had written down the night before were now muddled and slipping from his grasp.

*This man is threatening my right to realize my ambitions, my dream of an international career. His caustic criticisms of my every effort, seen on the Internet, will turn away prospective managements. I despise him, I really do.*

“Zafir, no one is questioning your right to defend yourself, but the contents of what you wrote are libellous. I am a respected dance historian and for someone like you, without an iota of knowledge of dance history, to come along and call me an ignoramus, well, that’s beyond the pale.”

“What I know or don’t know about dance history is beside the point; I know when I’m being unjustly attacked,” snorted Zafir.

“As a critic, it is my right and responsibility to share my views. And I repeat; you who certainly never heard of such trail blazers as Ted Shawn, Erik Hawkins and Harold Kreutzberg, all distinguished male dancers who carved out illustrious solo careers for themselves, you had the temerity to dismiss my critique by stating that I have no background as a source of reference.”

“When I read your reviews,” Zafir disdainfully retorted, “I’m not aware of your so-called historical knowledge, only your spite and venom.”

“What you call venom is the truth as I see it unsweetened by candy floss. But let’s put aside our differences of opinion, for the moment. To get down to brass tacks, I cannot take your work seriously. You are a cabaret act cavorting as supposed dance theatre. I see you as a cut or two above those male strippers, the Chippendales.”

“I think, Mr. Hassan, that one of these days you’ll pay for such an offensive dismissal of my hard work.”

“Or perhaps *you*, Zafir, will be the one to be cut down to size. In my view, you’re making enemies much faster than you’re making friends. It’s regrettable that your confidence has swelled into such cockiness and arrogance. During the past three months alone, you’ve publicly taken on four of my colleagues, all highly respected theatre and dance critics.”

“You’re jealous of me, jealous of my youth and my looks. I’m a reminder to you that you failed as a dancer and had to camouflage that failure with pseudo-academic credentials.”

*In his youth, he was strictly corps de ballet at the Cairo Opera House. One day it must have dawned on him that there was more to life than dancing profile in Aida or spiralling a cape in Carmen. From what I’ve heard, he went to London where he enrolled in a journalism course. His luck had changed, for before long he became a force to be reckoned with in local theatre criticism.*

“My academic credentials are legitimate,” brusquely retorted Hassan. “What audacity you have to make such a statement! Well, while we’re calling a spade a spade, I’ll mention another aspect of yourself that I find offensive. And that is, like a hip-hop dancer on the street, you’d spin on your head if it would elicit applause.”

“What’s the difference between spinning on one’s head or spinning on the soles of the feet?”

“Oh, don’t be so facetious with your glib responses. In point of fact, your appetite for applause is nothing compared to your absence of taste. You choose a lofty theme, such as your *Euthanasia*, then debase that theme with flashy nightclub stunts.”

Without forewarning, Patricia’s advice to Zafir flew out the window.

“All I can say to you is that I look forward to the day when your editors give you your marching orders. That day will be worth waiting for and when that happens, I’ll open a bottle of champagne to celebrate.”

“Well, Zafir al-Ziad, we’ll see who lasts longer, you or me.”

“Tell me, Mr. Hassan, how are you able to sleep at night when you think of how many careers you’ve destroyed?”

“And what about how many careers I’ve fostered? Zafir, you may well come out the winner in a male beauty contest, but you’re certainly not the artist of your self-indulgent fantasy. If truth be told, to watch you mince across the stage is to watch, how should I say it, a sequined drag queen trailing a feather boa.”

“What’s wrong with drag queens?” sneered Zafir. “At least they earn an honest living; they don’t hack people to pieces with their poison pens and then get paid for it.”

“My pen respects integrity. Long before you were born there was a German dancer named Alexander von Swaine. When I was very young, I had the good fortune to meet him

in Cologne. He was, among his other attributes, remarkably generous in his appraisals of others.”

“What does this von Swaine have to do with *me*?”

“As it happened, he found his own niche in dance, creating a repertoire for himself that was intensely dramatic and inventive. From head to toe, his dancing was like a scream in the night.”

“Why are you giving me this ancient history lecture?”

“Because von Swaine was everything you are not. At the age of 31, the same age you are now, he chose to be openly homosexual in the society of Nazi Germany, an expression of self that doomed gay men to die in concentration camps. The Spanish playwright Federico Garcia Lorca was also openly gay in the era of repressive Franco, and that openness cost him his life.”

“Mr. Hassan, am I hearing correctly? Are you actually suggesting that I offend the powers that be so that I can be slaughtered as some trussed-up goat?”

*I can hardly believe this man's armchair crusading! He is one of these behind the desk do-gooders who encourage people to sacrifice their lives for worthy causes, though he himself would never even join a protest line.*

“No. Zafir, not all. I am not encouraging you to die, but to remember that you started out as a serious dancer, yet somewhere along the way you got sidetracked. Whatever happened to your early honesty? Your need to express has been replaced by your need to exhibit.”

*That's your opinion. The cheers of the public suggest otherwise.*

“Just out of curiosity, did this openly gay Alexander von Swaine end up as one of your butchered heroes?”

“No, in actual fact, he lived, managing to escape the Nazis. After time spent in Burma and India, he eventually went to Mexico to teach, dying there as recently as 1990.”

*This von Swaine was a survivor, to be sure, but I don't see any connection with his life to my own. I don't believe it's a sin to entertain. Besides which, if I were forced to make a choice, I'd rather be a live male stripper than a dead Spanish playwright. So much for Hassan's pseudo-liberal heroics.*

"Mr. Hassan, just before I leave, I want to clarify one last point."

"Oh, I would have thought by now you've emptied your vial of vitriol. But go ahead, say what you want to say."

"I'm not as illiterate as you think. In point of fact, I come from an intellectual family background. In a biography I just finished reading about Sarah Bernhardt, there was a section describing her attack on the journalist Marie Colombier. This journalist, out of sheer vindictiveness, wrote a thinly veiled pornographic novel about Bernhardt's love life."

"Zafir, what's prompting you to deliver this discourse on Sarah Bernhardt? I don't need any lectures from *you*."

"Let me continue, if I may, it's relevant to what we've been talking about."

"All right, then, so what did the divine Sarah do in her undoubted rage?"

"She went to the writer's home, threatened her with a riding whip and with a knife ripped apart cushions, wall hangings and then smashed to smithereens a large quantity of porcelain."

"Oh," exclaimed Hassan, "that fracas must have filled the tabloids of the day."

"Yes, it did. So, Mr. Hassan, considering the hatred your reviews engender, don't you fear that you're going to end up, not threatened as that journalist, but maybe worse?"

With that final shot, Zafir scooped up his notes from the table, then turned on his heel and strode swiftly to the elevator. With resentment still coursing through his angry veins, he hit the button.

“One moment, Zafir,” called Hassan, walking quickly after him. “I wasn’t going to recycle old rubbish, but now after this confrontation, I think otherwise. Once, not that long ago, you were hired to choreograph the dances for a Lope de Vega play directed by none other than Jawad Salam.”

“I know, I was there,” Zafir answered sarcastically.

“But after the second week of rehearsals you demanded your salary in advance, irregular to say the least since the government was sponsoring the production. When your threat was refused, YOU walked out taking your troupe with you.”

“I don’t need you to remind me of what happened,” Zafir snapped back.

“The management had to hire a substitute choreographer and dancers with not a day to spare.”

“I had good reasons,” Zafir contested while glaring at his adversary.

“Did you? Well, such an ultimatum could have been the nail in your coffin, but somehow it wasn’t. Now, I for one will ignore your every future effort. For me, you no longer exist.”

Zafir stepped into the elevator and slammed the gate as noisily as he could.

## Chapter Six

### Encounter at the Souk

That evening, Zafir, still distressed from his meeting with the critic Fahad Hassan, couldn't concentrate on the new programme notes he was typing on his laptop computer. He was trying, without any success, to write a concise summary of the new ballet he had in mind, a choreographic response to the extensive correspondence between the great Lebanese writer, Khalil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*, and his devoted friend and patroness, the American, Mary Haskell.

But with his nerve endings jangled from the pile-up of conflicts, his muse had apparently deserted him. It would be pointless to push himself, because he knew he would dislike the result. Instead, he turned on the television and tuned into some junk reality programme from London, but the crude and coarse antics of the participants failed to arrest his attention. What a far cry from the sublime philosophy of the mystic from Lebanon.

He would go out and get a breath of air, and it would be fresher at this time of the night since the traffic had mainly subsided. No sooner had he made the decision to take a walk than he inwardly berated himself for such a transparent excuse, for he was very aware that the stimuli he sought had nothing to do with night air but new and untouched flesh, the excitement to be heightened by the calculated risk of melting into a stranger's unclothed body.

Putting on an electric blue sweater and tight white jeans, he left his apartment and walked to his car, parked half way down the block from the entrance to the building. Getting into his second-hand Volkswagen, he drove to the souk, anticipating meeting someone who would distract him from the unwelcome and accelerating pressures mounting on his shoulders. If only for an hour, he craved a respite from the

friction and hostility that were crowding his day by day existence. From his cumulative past escapades he knew that entwining bodies with a nameless stranger would serve that purpose. The fireworks of orgasm would ignite him, lightening his overcast skies, albeit only for its brief duration.

Again, it was late, past 10 p.m., with just a few tourists making last-minute purchases to decorate their homes with Syrian-tasseled lanterns, Indian-inspired metal jugs and, inescapably, the pungent assortment of Oriental spices.

A local café shopkeeper gestured for him to enter, for it was never too late to do last-minute business. Zafir sat down at the table furthest away from the alleyway, ordering a coffee with a slice of chocolate cake. He had barely sipped the steaming drink when he looked up to see a virile and swarthy young man, apparently a local and about his own age, walking in and seating himself at the adjacent table. The young man's choice of seat was obviously an overture since all the tables were vacant yet he had selected the table closest to Zafir.

After a few preliminary comments between the two about an attempted assassination near the American Embassy, Zafir introduced himself giving a false name that he had used in the past when he chose to remain incognito. There was no point, he knew, in putting all his cards on such an immediate table.

"My name is Baabar," Zafir said smiling.

"My name is Khattab," answered the young man who then, uninvited, moved from his table to Zafir's. At such close proximity, Zafir's mental viewfinder observed slightly pitted skin around his cheeks. A blemished complexion did not, nonetheless, deter him from making further contact.

"Are you from Damascus?" asked Zafir.

"No, I'm originally from Aleppo, but I moved to Damascus ten years ago. I was 20 then but already fed up with not being able to earn a living."

“What kind of work were you trying to do?” asked Zafir whose unchecked curiosity awaited an answer.

“I buy and repair second-hand computers and mobiles, then sell them for as much as the traffic will bear. There’s more of a market here in Damascus, what with all these rich tourists with money to burn.”

“I see,” murmured Zafir, “You know, I’m always impressed by people who are knowledgeable with hi-tech equipment. I just count myself lucky that I know how to operate my mobiles, type on my laptop and drive my car.”

“You sound more than comfortable, you come across to me as prosperous,” appraised Khattab.

“No,” protested Zafir, “I manage to make ends meet, but you can’t function nowadays without a mobile and computer and, as for the car, it’s works out cheaper than hiring a taxi or taking a train to let’s say, Palmyra.”

Khattab listened to Zafir as he spoke of having only the necessities, yet his jewellery suggested otherwise. He was wearing a thick gold ring that could have been for a marriage or engagement, he wasn’t sure, two gold chains interlinked around his neck and a watch with a gleaming gold wrist band rather than the customary leather strap.

“You’re wearing beautiful and expensive jewellery,” Khattab said, his comment edging Zafir into discomfort, for despite the compliment there was in the stranger’s remark a tinge of covetousness. In the land of biblical echoes, one of the Ten Commandments reminded the weary traveller not to covet a possession belonging to another.

“Oh, these trinkets,” Zafir said dismissively, “they were given to me as birthday presents; I could never have bought them for myself then and certainly not now.”

“Yes, you could and can. I know who you are,” Khattab suddenly stated, “because I’ve seen your photos in trendy magazines. You’re a well-known dancer, though I can’t recall your name. But it wasn’t the name you told me before.”

Zafir suddenly felt naked and defenceless as a rabbit running across a night highway in the blinding glare of head lights.

“Oh,” he answered, trying to make light of the sudden re-routing of the conversation, “It’s just a policy of mine not to tell people anything about me until I know them better. In fact, I was just about to tell you, but you beat me to the punch.”

Just then the waiter started hovering over them as if to point out that closing time was imminent. The lights, a further reminder, were dimmed. Zafir and Khattab looked at each other, their proximate faces now in shadow. Despite the dimness of the light, Khattab’s pitted skin now stood out in sharper relief and Zafir, averting his gaze, wondered from which childhood disease it may have stemmed, for children do pick at scabs and later suffer pursuant facial scars.

“Can’t we go back to your place?” asked Khattab. “I live with a family so having coffee there at this hour is out of the question.”

Suddenly Zafir realized that he was possibly feasting with panthers and that he had better make his excuses, say goodnight and drive home alone. But with each second’s delay, he realized that he was haphazardly discarding the code of self-protection. Under the tablecloth, Khattab, sensing Zafir’s indecision, placed his hand midway on his thigh.

Standing up and chancing his luck, Zafir heedlessly let Khattab follow him to his car and drive back with him to his small apartment on the outskirts of Damascus. All the way back Khattab was sitting uncomfortably close to Zafir as if to declare his intentions that were already as clear as the nose on his Semitic face.

Once in the apartment, Zafir noticed that Khattab’s eyes were not encompassing the mementoes of his dancing

career, the posters and framed awards, but his hi-tech accessories.

Without further preliminaries, Khattab directed Zafir to the bed and not so gently pushed him down on to it then got on top of him. Zafir, trying to adjust himself under the weight of his all but unknown guest, deliberated as to the wisdom of his allowing himself to be put into such a pinned down and immovable position. Some moments later while Khattab had begun to fondle him, Zafir relaxed his vigil, feeling his fears had begun to border on the paranoid. Sliding his hand between Khattab's thighs, he returned his attentions with an intimate caress, but felt at once that his visitor was not one iota aroused.

The warning announcement had now begun blasting at deafening level, for Zafir knew from experience that such non-response meant that it was not furtive sex, but outright theft, that was on the pick-up's one-track mind.

At that very moment the land phone rang on the adjacent night table. Zafir, stretching his arm to answer it, was relieved to hear Patricia's voice. Unable to reach him on his mobile, for he had switched it off at the souk, she was inquiring as to his whereabouts and well-being.

"Patricia, let me just say goodnight to a friend who's visiting me," Zafir said, then hung up and without pause began to show Khattab out of the apartment, offering him a makeshift excuse that he had to discuss urgent matters with his colleague on the phone.

"Let's meet tomorrow night at the souk, same time," said Khattab as the apartment door was being closed in haste and with palpable relief by the admittedly reckless Zafir.

Saved by the bell, in this instance, the ring of the telephone, thought Zafir. What kind of temporary madness had tipped the balance between safety and danger?

Khattab had very mistakenly grouped him with rock stars featured in the glossy magazines that decorated the

newsstands. Rock musicians certainly had money to burn; he didn't.

What misled him to think he was invincible, that he was protected from any sudden harm, that he was indestructible? He wasn't, any more than the racing rabbit on the lone night highway.

On one of his earlier flights abroad, Zafir had been perusing the airport magazine racks and began thumbing through a book that had caught his eye. It was an American bestseller called *Predicting Violence*, the name of the author now escaping him. In this book, written by an expert on protecting top American public figures, he recalled that the book's main theme was on personal survival; how to recognize potential predators and on how to foresee the warning signs of physical violence. Fear, the author stated with decades of experience, helps save one's life because it causes the potential victim to be cautious and not to plunge headlong into a situation that could prove fatal.

In the light of this book, why, then, could he have behaved with such blatant stupidity? How could he have invited a total stranger to enter his apartment and then to further place his life at risk by letting him lie down on top of him? In such a passive position, he was incapacitated to a degree.

Zafir didn't know the answer but he just then recalled the name of the author whose expert counsel had been ignored, Stanley Goodlaw. How ironic that he should remember the name of the author, but not at all his advice.

Was this Khattab an opportunistic thief who augmented his meagre income by stealing? He couldn't know with any certainty, but if he hadn't been feasting with panthers, he certainly had been lying down with one of them.

It couldn't have been more than two minutes after Khattab had unceremoniously been ushered out of the apartment, than Patricia phoned again, ringing incessantly

until Zafir decided to answer it.

“Are you all right?” she inquired. “What took you so long to answer? Whoever you were with made you acutely uncomfortable.”

“No, you’re worrying over nothing. I’m fine. It was an old school friend who had dropped in to say hello,” protested Zafir, lying through his pearl-white teeth.

“Zafir, come on, I know you too well to be fooled. I hope you weren’t entertaining anyone you didn’t know, like rough trade for example.”

“No, of course not. I’m not out of my mind, you know, so don’t worry.”

Attempting to re-route the course of their conversation, for she had caught him with his pants down, almost literally, he asked her what prompted her to phone at such a late hour.

Khattab, who had remained in the hallway, put his ear to the door and though he could hear Zafir speaking on the phone, was unable to make out what he was saying. Slowly pushing open the metal mail slot, he peered through the slit and watched Zafir as he chatted on the phone, toying nervously with the gold chains around his neck. Suddenly hearing the sound of footsteps on the stairs below, he released the mail drop and hurriedly left the building.

## Chapter Seven

### By the Ruins of Baalbeck

“I’m calling you, Zafir, because I need to discuss something with you. It’s urgent and very private.”

“Well, let’s meet tomorrow morning in the lobby of the Cham Palace, under that gorgeous chandelier. There will be so many people around that no one will even notice us.”

The Cham Palace chandelier was the largest Patricia had ever seen anywhere, and its vast dimensions always made her think of the *Phantom of the Opera* and his screaming victims as the chandelier crashed into the crowd below.

“No, Zafir, such a public place here in Damascus is out of the question.”

“Well, then, what about in front of the Omayyad mosque? People go there to pray, not to eavesdrop on anyone’s conversations.” He was unsuccessfully trying to make light of her urgent tone, for the cadence of her speech portended unhappy news.

“No, I have a better idea. Let’s drive to Baalbeck. It’s not that far away by car and it’s out of the country. Anyway, there’s an atmosphere about Baalbeck that I find quieting, you could call it pacifying.”

Zafir knew better than to further dispute her choice of location for the serious talk she had in mind. Without knowing what she wanted to tell him, as the seconds ticked by he sensed that whatever she had to confide to him were tidings of an ill omen, something, he sensed, to do with their relationship.

The next morning, with Zafir behind the steering wheel, they set out early from Damascus and were soon driving through the muffled echoes of the sand-covered civilizations of Sumeria, Assyria and Phoenicia.

As they were passing through vistas that could have sprung from the Bible itself, Patricia asked Zafir if they could make a slight detour through Maalula, the city that is said to have been the birthplace of Christianity. There, she knew, the people spoke Aramaic, reputedly the language of Jesus, a language that has been left unrecorded on paper though transmitted verbally from parents to offspring. Driving through the village, Zafir noticed that Patricia stared through the car window as if she were mentally recording the images that whizzed past her.

Soon they had crossed the Syrian border into the Beqaa plain of east Lebanon. Patricia was visibly relieved that they had arrived so quickly at Baalbeck's ancient ruins. They extricated themselves from the cramped car, stretched for a few seconds, then stood still in an awkward pause preceding the discussion they were about to engage in.

Neither spoke as they gazed in awe at the monumental Temples of Bacchus, Venus and Jupiter, structures that still resonated with their archaic history. There they were, among the largest and most intact remains of Roman temples, magnificent ruins serving as a reminder that each civilization swallows up the preceding one. Time is a glutton, Patricia felt, its appetite never to be appeased.

Under the sweltering rays of the midday sun, they could still hear the sound of the racing wheels of gilded chariots; they could still see parading before them a dazzling parade of vanished splendour, the plumed and helmeted grandeur that once announced imperial Rome.

But neither Zafir nor Patricia were in the mood to relish much longer the experience of a transport through the origins of time, for it was the intimidating present that excluded everything else from their pounding minds. Though in the shadows of the cedars of Lebanon, they were both too distracted to fully surrender to the experience.

Gingerly stepping across the massive rocks of toppled glory, they sat down in the shade next to the columns of the once sacrosanct Temple of Jupiter.

“Zafir, this is very difficult for me to say, but I can’t keep hiding behind a mask the rest of my life. I can’t keep running away from the past. If I go on like this, I’m fooling myself, fooling you, wasting my present life and denying any future for either one of us.”

“What’s gotten into you, Patricia? Why on earth are you talking like this? What’s happened since I saw you last?”

“Zafir, you know as well as I do that our relationship is a masquerade, nothing more. To continue like this is to live a lie 24 hours a day. You know, if you’re honest with yourself, that we’ve reached an impasse. We have to face the fact that we have no future together.”

“What do you mean, no future? What are you going on about?” knowing full well the meaning behind her statement.

“Listen carefully to me, for this is becoming more and more difficult as I go on. Zafir, I can’t continue to deceive myself. This engagement story is nothing more than a public camouflage. We’re never going to get married, you know it and I know it. And now I’m tired of living this lie. I have to face reality and I have to find the strength to do it. But I’ll never be able to do it on my own; I’ll need professional help, a psychiatrist.”

“Patricia, I don’t understand what’s gotten into you! Why are you rambling on like this? You love me and I love you and in the light of that fact, the rest of your so-called confessions count for nothing.”

“Unfortunately, they *do* count. I made a big mistake when I agreed in Japan to come to Syria with you. I saw you as a savior and in point of fact you saw me in the same protective vein. We would hide behind each other, that facade protecting us from the world. But it hasn’t worked out that way. Instead of becoming a more polished dancer, I’ve

become a more polished liar. Now I have no more patience to go on like this.”

“But we dance together, I choreograph ballets for you, I promote you, it’s *you* I love, you certainly are aware of that.”

“On an artistic level, yes, you love me as a creative instrument, just like a palette of water colours if you were a painter. And you love me as a sister, not as most men love women.”

“There you go again with expected patterns of behaviour. I need you, you need *me*, I love *you* and you love *me*. Why do you insist on finding safe labels?”

“Labels have nothing to do with my change of direction. Confronting the reality, *my* reality, that’s what this is all about.”

“Tell me, Patricia, would it make any difference to your way of thinking if I were to see myself as, not gay, but bisexual? What I feel for you is something I never felt before for a woman, so that’s what makes me think that perhaps I’m, how should I put it, a closet straight.”

“Oh, don’t delude yourself, Zafir. Even if you could manage to perform, to use that silly phrase, you are completely gay and there’s nothing at all wrong with that. You sound like these atheists who call themselves agnostics, you know, to soften the edges. Be true to yourself. You are what you are.”

“Labels, labels, they’re just convenient pegs for people who are too lazy to think. What has happened to you from one day to the next?”

“It’s not one day to the next. It’s every day of my life; it’s every day of my past that I can’t escape from no matter how far I live away from home. Someone once said that the traveller can change his skies, but never his soul.”

“What on earth are you trying to escape from? Tell me!”

“All right, Zafir, you’re forcing me to share with you a terrible personal history. I’m going to try and spit it out,

because it may be just that little bit less painful if it's quick.”

“Please, Patricia, blurt it out! Whatever you tell me will be less hurtful than my not knowing.”

“You leave me no choice. Here it is, so steel yourself. When I was nine years old, my father died. His death was a body blow to me for I loved him dearly. Then, less than a year later my mother re-married a man she knew casually. He was a geology teacher in some private school, a position that enabled him to project an air of respectability. But underneath the public image, he was a child molester of experience, on the register of serial sex offenders. This, of course, was unknown to my mother at the time of her remarriage.”

“Did he start molesting you?” queried Zafir, already knowing her response.

“Yes, and that molestation moved into serious sexual abuse, abuse that continued until I was able to escape from home at the age of 16. At first, my mother refused to believe my story of continued rape, until she took me to her gynecologist who confirmed the fact that I had long been severely and internally injured. She immediately began divorce proceedings against him and warned him that if either one of us ever saw him again, she'd report the crime to the police.”

“What a dreadful way to have grown up,” Zafir mumbled in commiseration.

“By this time, I was afraid of all men. I couldn't even hold hands on a date. Studying ballet seriously was my salvation, except in the pas de deux classes. I couldn't bear for a boy to hold me around the waist, to lift me in the air or otherwise get entangled with him as you have to in contemporary choreography.”

“Oh Patricia, I had no idea.”

“This is the reason why even when some director of a company in the UK would be interested me, a few even

having accepted me, they would reverse their decisions once they saw me freezing up when partnered. When I met you at the Abanti Hall in Kyoto, and quickly noticed your positive response to me, I told you, as a sort of insurance policy, a tall tale I had in readiness.”

“You mean about being hypersensitive to bruising?”

“Yes, and that therefore I couldn’t do partnering in the expected sense, but could do any other kind of movement you required.”

“What an insurmountable obstacle for any dancer,” empathized Zafir.

“I vowed to myself that after what I’d been through all those years with my stepfather, I’d never let another man touch me sexually.

And then I met you in Japan and I saw a solution; that with you I could have closeness, maybe even love, but an absence of any sexual contact would suit us both equally.”

“You mean, you knew I was gay and that I’d provide a safe haven of sorts.”

“Yes, after all, I wasn’t born yesterday. I had been around gay boys in the studios long enough to know we could have a non-physical kind of relationship, a relationship that would comfortably suit both of us. With me at your side, you could become officially engaged. You were straight, not a whiff of being gay as far as people prying from behind semi-closed blinds. And as for myself, I didn’t have to fend off other men who otherwise might be after me.”

“But I don’t understand, Patricia, why if it’s worked between us this long, can’t it continue like this? What’s gotten into you from one moment to the next to change your way of thinking?”

“It’s not really that sudden at all. This issue has always been there, but I’ve kept it under wraps. But the other day, I understood that as I approached my 23rd birthday, I was wasting my life unless I could get to the root of what ails me

and do something about it. Coming to a crossroads, I thought that I'd rather spend the next ten years in analysis than the next ten years in this time-killing charade."

"Patricia, I can hardly take in what you're telling me. Please don't tell me you're going to leave me."

"Zafir, I *do* love you, but I can't stay with you. I really can't. Also, there's another issue on my mind that I have to confront. One of these days I'll be thirty, then forty, and I don't want to end up an old childless woman like so many ballet dancers. Who's going to keep their eye on me when my mother eventually dies and I become an old woman myself? There'll be no one, and I have to face it, there'll be no one in my life to take care of my funeral arrangements."

"Why are you dwelling on death so much? What is this preoccupation with burial? At your age, you should be concentrating on living, not dying."

"You think I'm being morbid; I think I'm being practical, that is, facing the reality. When I look at old ballet programmes, then I realize how quickly time devours youth."

Zafir could no longer contain the utter sadness that swept over him as Patricia unfolded her until now hidden needs and fears. He began to cry. Neither spoke as he struggled to regain his outer composure.

"It really is strange to leave someone that you love," she admitted, yielding to a twinge of guilt.

"What, then, are your plans?" he asked tentatively, fearful that the question would accelerate the end.

"After we fulfill our current engagements I'm going to go back to London, stop dancing and try to obtain funding for treatment. I'll manage to live on British Social Security while I'm undergoing this therapy. The Social Services will help me but, most of all, I'm going to help myself.

"But what about your passion to dance? It's not as if you can turn that off like a wall switch."

“Well, I’m going to have to try. Ballet, I’ve come to believe, is like an opiate. The sound of Tchaikovsky, floating through blue lights, we’re hooked, no less than drug addicts.”

“You’re talking rubbish, Patricia! *I’m* no junkie and neither are you!”

“Yes, we are; the fix is the daily class and the high is the performance. I have to treat myself now, to de-toxify.”

“Patricia, what a squalid comparison! There’s nothing wrong with being passionately involved in dance. *I* know that you *need* to dance.”

“Yes, true enough. I *do* need to dance, and I *do* need to express myself, but I’ll re-route that need and succeed. One of these days, who knows, I may even try my hand at writing. Maybe I’ll start with some short stories.”

“And what should *I* do, Patricia, now that you’re throwing me to the lions?”

“Zafir, I’m doing nothing of the sort. You’ll do just what you were doing before you met me; trying to act straight, and when you feel the need to drop the mask, then you’ll be discreet.”

Crushed and crestfallen, Zafir had to concede that Patricia’s brave overflow of truth was just that, the truth unvarnished. Painful as it was to hear it and share it, her traumatic history and fears for the unknown future could no longer be side-stepped.

“You’ll be fine, Zafir, you’re stubborn and resourceful and you have a lot going for you, that is, if you manage to scale down your ego, somewhat.”

“Even *you* get after me for believing in myself.”

“There’s a big dividing line between believing in yourself and a runaway ego. For the moment, I think the best thing for you to do is to go alone to that festival in Holland. By doing so, you’ll be making a public statement that we’re not a couple on stage anymore. And I’ll make an announcement in my Facebook that our engagement is off. As we were so

publicly together, we'll now promote our personal and artistic apartness."

With that declaration of severance, Patricia walked to the nearby Temple of Venus and burst into a cascade of tears, tears that refused to evaporate even in the heat of the desert sun.

All the way back on the road to Damascus neither spoke as Zafir drove, the silence punctuated only by his or her occasional muted sobs, a canonic duet of thwarted hopes.

## Chapter Eight

### Windmills of Hate

All through the flight from Damascus to Amsterdam, Zafir could think of little else but the ramifications of his pain-filled confrontation with Patricia. His former belief that nothing could prevent him from scaling the heights had been dealt a body blow.

The plane began its descent into Schiphol Airport, its landing smooth and imperceptible. With the signal to release seat belts given, Zafir cleared the overhead locker of his muffler, leather coat and shoulder bag, hoping that his single piece of luggage had arrived. It contained his costume, make-up, props, practice clothes and change of clothes needed for the week's intensive stay.

His immediately noticeable lime green suitcase was one of the first to arrive on the carousel. Grabbing it before it would make another interminable revolution, he started to go through the 'nothing to declare' passage when he was stopped by a security guard.

"Open your luggage, please," was the impersonalized command. He did as requested, and winced when his carefully packed garments and accessories were disarranged with insensitive and impatient hands. Then he was frisked by another guard, the metal detectors lingering seconds longer below his belt as if they thought he might be carrying a hand grenade in his underpants. The fact that he was arriving from the heart of the Middle East, Damascus, did not add to his credibility.

Several seconds later, though it seemed much longer, they dismissively gestured for him to go through. As he exited into the greeting area he, with a silent sigh of relief, saw at once a middle-aged man holding up a sign with his name, ZAFIR AL-ZIAD. It turned out to be Henryck Ryker,

the director of the Dance Art Festival, the man who had invited him without hesitation once he had viewed the DVD Zafir had sent him.

Henryck struck him as in his early 50s, obviously once a dancer himself with his light and slightly turned out walk.

This Dutch invitation, Zafir, knew, was a major opportunity to be seen beyond the Syrian borders, to build a career of international dimensions.

On the way in the taxi to the Hotel Zandbergen where he would be staying, Henryck briefed him on the revised sequence of events to take place.

The first night would consist of the official opening ceremonies. Then, on the second night, several dancers from Albania and Morocco would be appearing. On the third and closing night, a group from Turkey would premiere their latest ensemble work, the evening to close with Zafir dancing his solo *Symbols*. From Henryck's quick summary of the events, the Festival's attractions seemed an exciting mix, rekindling the flickering flame of Zafir's enthusiasm.

Once in his hotel room, Zafir unpacked his suitcase and then, after a quick shower, splashed himself with cologne from the small bottles lining the bathroom shelf. Aware that every minute counted with so many scheduled performances in so short a time span, Zafir hurriedly dressed and then took the lift downstairs to meet Henryck. A man whose sense of purpose enlivened his every word and move, they entered the restaurant and were ushered to a table for two.

Henryck was careful to point out to Zafir that though he understood that his work in Syria often raised eyebrows, here in the Netherlands the climate was exceptionally liberal. Young prostitutes were exhibited in shop windows, a display that many people found utterly degrading, while politicians and filmmakers had no compunctions whatsoever about speaking their minds on a variety of contentious subjects. The country had a long history of humane acceptance and

as Zafir eagerly listened to Henryck's summary of official open-mindedness, he was grateful to be working in such an all-embracing ambience.

He also realized that his near naked body and seductive movements were not going to thrust him into any limelight here in the Netherlands. He would be accepted or rejected only on his artistic merits. This was the country where, a few decades back, the national ballet companies had a corps de ballet of male dancers appearing completely nude on stage. In actual fact, they were not ground breakers, since in that period, before Zafir was old enough to remember, it was the height of fashion in the dance world to parade totally uncovered bodies, both male and female.

In that same period in the 1970s, even in the august surroundings of the Royal Opera House in Copenhagen, the director of the Royal Danish Ballet, Flemming Flindt, appeared nude in his own ballet, *The Triumph of Death*. Once he had disengaged himself from his costume, he began spraying a bottle of red paint over his no longer private parts.

"You take such artistic freedoms for granted, Henryck. In my part of the world it's a struggle to show the body unless it's covered from head to toe in Lycra. If you have some statement to make about life, art or politics, you have to cloak it in ancient myths to make it acceptable."

"Well, Zafir, I don't want to throw a wet blanket on your impressions of life in Holland, but during the last few years we've had two sensational murders of public figures, murders that have thrown a monkey wrench into our once famous open-minded climate."

"Which murders are you referring to?" asked Zafir beginning to feel uncomfortable that he was so uninformed about current events outside of Syria and its adjacent neighbours.

“We had a very outspoken and courageous far right politician named Pim Fortuyn. He hid nothing, declaring his homosexuality as openly as he did his controversial political credos. His detractors placed him in the same hate-ridden category as the Austrian Jörg Haider and Frenchman Jean-Marie Le Pen, but he fiercely rejected such comparisons.”

“What happened to him?” questioned a concerned Zafir who already knew the answer without having ever read anything of the assassination. Until he started to travel, Zafir had little interest in foreign political events, cradling himself in his own multi-mirrored and cocooned world.

Henryck continued.

“During the election campaign in 2002, after Fortuyn had given a radio interview in Hilversum, he was shot dead in the adjacent car park. Some militant and fanatic activist had harboured a mounting grudge against him, accusing the crusading politician of exploiting Dutch Muslims as ‘scapegoats’. Only by ridding the country of the man who had threatened their fragile security, could the assassin protect long settled Arab immigrants and their children born in Holland. So did the killer think.”

“Did they catch him?”

“Yes, and he was sent to prison, but for how long remains to be seen.”

“I don’t recall that happening,” said Zafir. “You see, assassinations, executions and targeted killings are rife in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. Also in Israel where their own Prime Minister, Rabin, was shot dead by an extreme far right Israeli. So, in a way, I’m used to public figures being exterminated like so much vermin.”

“I don’t know why I’m telling you all this, Zafir. You say you’re used to such assassinations, but does one ever really get used to such murders? I’m sorry if I’ve put a damper on your mood.”

“No, it’s all right. I should be more aware of local events wherever I happen to be. There has to be more to life than just kissing your own mirror image.”

“True enough. I couldn’t agree with you more. Listen, why don’t we pay a quick visit to the Rembrandt Museum and then I’ll take you for a stroll along the canals?”

“That would be really nice. I also want to buy some postcards of Dutch artists to send some friends in Damascus.”

“Any artists in particular?”

“Well, I’ve done my homework and know that you’ve produced not only Rembrandt, but also Frans Hals, Vermeer and my favourite, van Gogh.

“Why is van Gogh your favourite?”

“When I stop to think about it, I’m drawn not only to his paintings, but also to his life. He was only 37 when he killed himself.”

“Zafir, I wasn’t going to tell you of any more of the violence that’s pockmarked our country, but since you just mentioned van Gogh, I feel you ought to know about our most recent public killing; the film director, Theo van Gogh. Then, if you’re still in the mood, instead of the Rembrandt Museum, I’ll take you to the Vincent van Gogh Museum. He seems to be closer to your heart.”

“I wish we had time for both.”

“There’s never enough time, Zafir,” complained Henryck ruefully.

## Chapter Nine

### In the Shadow of Van Gogh

“Too true,” concurred Zafir. “Tell me, is Theo van Gogh any relation to Vincent?”

“Yes, Theo van Gogh’s great-grandfather, also called Theo, was the brother of Vincent van Gogh, a sibling whom he loved with a constancy that was rare between any two people. In fact, he died shortly after Vincent shot himself in the chest.”

“So tell me the bad news about this Theo, the film director. How did he die?”

“Well, this Theo van Gogh was a daringly forthright and controversial man who thrived on the flashpoints he maneuvered. He had hateful relationships with just about everyone whose path he crossed. In fact, he had a knack of trampling on everyone’s toes, including the Dutch monarchy which he wanted abolished by any available means including violence. As for his public utterances against Islam, they seethed with a loathing that bordered between expulsion and genocide.”

“How does one live with such hatred?” asked Zafir.

“Well, the answer to that question is that he didn’t live much longer. For, in point of fact, he not only campaigned against Arabs, he also took on the Dutch Jewish community. Firstly, he criticized them for keeping in the public consciousness the horrors of Auschwitz. An acutely irate Jewish historian, a woman named Evelien Gans, decided to contest his views in the media. Seizing a new opportunity for attacking an ethnic minority, van Gogh surpassed himself in ugliness by writing in *Folia Civitatis* magazine: ‘I suspect that Ms. Gans gets wet dreams about being fucked by Dr. Mengele.’ He then goaded her into suing him for libel so that he could air his grievances very publicly in court.”

“Did she sue him?”

“No, the woman prudently chose to ignore his explosive anti-Semitic stance.”

“He was always spoiling for a fight,” commented Zafir.

“Yes, and it was never enough. The Jewish community, however, was small potatoes compared to his abhorrence of the many Muslims who had settled in the Netherlands. Van Gogh’s latest film, *Submission*, was severely critical of certain customs of Arabs living outside the land of their origin. That he was murdered came as a surprise to no one, for it was only a question of when.”

“How was he killed?” Zafir asked, bracing himself for yet another example of human savageness.

“He was shot eight times at a busy street corner in early morning, here in Amsterdam, as he was cycling to work.”

“In other words, a kind of public execution.”

“Yes, then the killer’s fury not abated, he was a radical Islamic activist, he slit van Gogh’s throat, almost decapitating him. To make it clear as to why his victim had met such a ghastly end, he attached a five-page letter to the corpse by a knife plunged deep inside his chest.”

“Henryck, I need a breath of fresh air. Enough of persecution and punishment. Let’s buy some postcards and then get to the post office. I’d like the cards to arrive in Damascus before I do.”

“I’ll take you to the Vincent van Gogh Museum. We’ll have a quick look around and then you can select postcards from what I’m sure is their large collection.”

Immersed in their own thoughts, they began walking to the Museum.

“I’m sorry, Zafir, if I’ve gone on at length about those murders. But what those two men stood for is parallel to my own credo. You see, though I certainly don’t share all their views, I detest censorship of any kind, either in books,

theatre or film. Fortuyn and van Gogh both had a right to express themselves.”

“Henryck, I had the feeling when you were speaking that you had some kind of emotional involvement in this, that those murders were more than two terrible crimes that took place here in Holland.”

“Yes, Zafir, you’re right. In fact, the underlying theme of this Festival is to present people from turbulent areas of the world, such as yourself, or works whose themes dare, in no uncertain terms, to denounce injustice.”

“That’s brave and admirable of you.”

“I don’t pat myself on the back for my beliefs. I just do what I can do within my own limited sphere.”

Before long, they had arrived at the Museum. Zafir was thrilled to stand before the famous works of art that van Gogh, himself, had stood in front of when he painted them. There, before him, was *The Starry Night*, *Sunflowers*, *Irises* and *The Potato Eaters*.

Ever conscious of the time, Henryck led Zafir to the postcard desk where he bought a half dozen reproductions of van Gogh’s most popular paintings.

With the cards purchased and posted, the days blurred by swiftly. Though Amsterdam was a charming city, its canal streets looking exactly as in the museum paintings, its history cherished and preserved, Zafir’s thoughts were primarily on the unexpected termination of his relationship with Patricia and, not least, on the violent happenings Henryck had been disclosing. For a reason he couldn’t put his finger on, Henryck’s graphic recounting of the double murders hovered over him as some distant but approaching storm cloud.

During the late afternoon of the performance day, Zafir arrived at the theatre, getting there in ample time to set up his make-up table, props, costumes and then to do a thorough warm-up. Everything was timed as always to avoid last-minute rushing. That included obliging any photographer

or journalist who might arrive during the hour preceding the curtain. He could then give them some minutes for any requested photos and mini-interviews.

In the middle of his preparations, there was an impatient and staccato knocking on the door, jarring Zafir out of his collage of overlapping thoughts. When he opened the dressing room door, Henryck quickly entered in a very stressed and disturbed state.

“What’s wrong?” Zafir asked, at once apprehensive.

“There’s some stupid picket demonstration going on outside the theatre. About eight or nine of them are holding up placards with a few others handing out leaflets to people as they enter the theatre.”

“Leaflets about what?” asked Zafir.

“Hate leaflets. I was of two minds to come here and tell you this before the performance, but I thought I’d better in case it escalates and they enter the theatre while you’re on. We’ve alerted the police because there’s no doubt that the pickets are determined to disrupt the performance.”

“Tell me, Henryck, what do the placards say? What do the leaflets say? Which group is behind this?”

“The protesting group call themselves White Christian Supremacy. Their placards have large black letters painted on them that say JESUS HATES GAYS.”

“Oh, that disgusting gay bashing type. Where are they from?”

“All of them are from Alabama in the USA and they’re violently homophobic.”

“What do they want?”

“I see I can’t keep this information from you. Their leaflets and placards state that they’ve seen you on the Internet and consider you a dangerous temptation to same sex sin. Their main thrust is that your presentations promote homosexual values among their God-fearing congregations.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Zafir fumed. “I’m promoting nothing of the kind. If anything, I’m promoting my own dancing and choreography! Why, in God’s name, are they picking on *me*? I haven’t had any brushes with the law. I haven’t indulged in any under-age sex and I don’t go around recruiting gays from American fundamentalist churches!”

The tannoy in Zafir’s dressing room suddenly blasted an urgent call for Henryck. Racing out of the dressing room, he hoped the police had arrived because he knew that until these extremists were driven from the premises, they would certainly get into the auditorium and who could predict what kind of violent acts they would perpetrate?

Henryck remembered reading that, in 1972, when the American Jewish impresario S. Hurok presented a Soviet dance attraction in New York, fanatics from the Jewish Defense League planted a fire bomb in his office. The explosive killed his 27-year-old receptionist, he still remembered her name, Iris Kones, and also injured 13 others including Hurok himself who had to be hospitalized for smoke inhalation.

The JDL, as they were infamously known, were protesting the impresario’s presentation of Soviet attractions while the Kremlin were relentlessly persecuting would-be emigrating Jews to Israel.

Henryck, determined to avoid any duplication of such murderous acts under his own banner, reached the street outside the theatre. Instantly he was met by the police who explained to him that the well-staged commotion was being orchestrated by a group of Bible-thumping sexual bigots.

Several new placards that Henryck hadn’t seen before had printed on them, GAYS GO TO HELL, a hate message that the protesters were now hollering and shouting in repeated unison, all of them into loudspeakers.

Then they began a chant of undiluted hatred:

*No place for gays!*

*Erase the Jews!*

*No space for Muslims!*

*Chase out the blacks!*

*God's grace is for pure whites only!*

The officers had decided that the protesters were disturbing the peace and publicly conducting themselves in a most threatening manner. Interrupting their demonstration, they herded the protesters into a special van, then took them at speed, sirens wailing, to the nearest police station.

One empathetic policeman commented to Henryck that the Netherlands had enough problems of its own and didn't need to be polluted by murderous fire and brimstone pulpit preachers. In all probability, he added, since no major crime had as yet been committed, they would, unfortunately, be released before the evening ended.

As the audience filled the theatre, most of them were aware that there had been an ugly disturbance of some kind on the street, but were relieved that all appeared under control by now.

After several minutes' delay to ensure that peace, or its semblance, had been restored, the houselights slowly faded to black. As the stage lights gradually came up, the sound of distant percussive drums accompanied by a melancholy oboe could be heard, a duet for lonely instruments. Zafir's solo, *Symbols*, had begun.

Determined to achieve more than a run-of-the-mill success, Zafir called upon his sure-fire, applause-demanding stunt of bouncing on his bare toes, not once, but twice, the second time causing one of his toes to bleed. In his all-consuming need to lasso the crowd, his big toe had slipped into the space provided for the stationary turntable. Not one to let a little blood deter him from reaching the finishing line, he continued to dance and win over the audience, for he saw

a performance as a battle, with himself always emerging the victor.

The performance had concluded. Zafir, in *Symbols*, if not raising the audience's expectations to Dionysian heights, nonetheless acquitted himself with honour. Directly after the last curtain call, he returned to his dressing room for his scheduled post-performance interview with Sibylla Smith, a critic from the influential British magazine, *The Dancing World*. Zafir knew that whatever she wrote would be read in many countries, so wide was their readership.

He answered the assertive knock on the door and saw before him a still slender woman in her mid-forties, her outlandishly carrot-coloured hair arranged in a fringe and pony tail. The pale blue blouse she wore was cut too low, he thought, considering her skimpy bosom, but her plaid skirt revealed the still shapely legs of a former dancer.

Zafir politely offered her a chair in which she sat opposite him.

"What was *Symbols* about?" she queried, "that is, how do you yourself explain its meaning?"

Zafir knew that, in truth of fact, he had not really examined its meaning at all.

"I just liked the title and felt that its very non-specific name gave me carte blanche to give vent to whichever impulse that would come to me in the studio."

While Sibylla re-crossed her legs to fill in the awkward pause that followed his vague answer, Zafir sensed that he needed to add to his rather generalized response.

"I don't really like to define a work in a programme note, or dictate to an audience my own concept. I just make shapes in space and you interpret them in your own mind. *Symbols* means something, it means nothing, as long as it shifts your thoughts away from the ordinary and mundane."

By Sibylla's pleased expression, he knew that he had said something quotable.

The critic was glued to Zafir's every word for she made no secret of fancying him. In fact, he could have stuttered his way thorough the entire session, for it was his personal magnetism and facial features that reached her, not his unexceptional philosophy.

Zafir, when interviewed, always turned up the decibel level of his charm, for he was aware that whatever he said would reach many people. The interview, he knew from experience, was akin to a performance.

Wearing a black silk, flower-patterned kimono and only his white dance belt underneath, he made no effort to tighten the knot of the sash. As he spoke, he was conscious that the kimono had opened to partly reveal his bare and muscled thighs.

The interview wound down with Sibylla reluctantly saying goodbye. Just before leaving, she obeyed an impulse and took the liberty of giving him a lingering kiss on the cheek, inhaling his cologne, caked make-up and dried sweat.

"You know," she added, "with your looks, if you had chosen, you could have been a film actor, maybe the first Arabic-speaking Hollywood star since Omar Sharif."

"Oh, no," he demurred, "I want to dance in theatres in front of audiences, not on sound stages in front of cameras. But thanks, anyway, Ms. Smith, for the compliment."

"Oh, do call me Sibylla," she purred, her coquetry a futile effort to compensate for the fading calling card of time.

"With your permission, I will," Zafir responded with an engaging smile that rarely if ever missed its target. While exerting his considerable charm in Sibylla's direction, he suddenly started massaging his right calf muscle.

"Do you have a spasm in your calf?" Sibylla asked with some concern, while sensing an opportunity to explore hitherto forbidden territory.

"Yes, my calf muscle just seized up, but it's my own fault.

I didn't warm up enough before the performance, thanks to the scuffle outside the theatre."

"I know. I saw the pickets jostling the ticket holders who had tried to push past them. Thankfully, it's over now."

"Not that Bible of theirs, *that's* not over. That book is their blueprint for mass murder," Zafir said scornfully, a slight shudder passing through his battle-weary frame. "After this experience, I never want to see the Old *or* New Testament in a hotel drawer again."

"It's been a hard night for you, Zafir. Why don't you make the effort to put it behind you? Let me massage your calf for you," she offered with barely contained enthusiasm for the task at hand. "I've taken a basic course in physiotherapy, so you won't be at any risk, I can assure you."

Knowing which side his bread was buttered on, he extended his leg to rest on Sibylla's lap, letting her manipulate his calf muscle. Almost immediately, he felt that her area of kneading had already extended above his knee. With her impatient and restless hands, his kimono had by now opened so that his brief white dance belt was in full view.

Sibylla appeared to be floating in some unexpected seventh heaven, for she was getting closer to the object of her desire than she had ever anticipated. As for Zafir, aware of his abysmal track record with critics, he was determined to turn over a new leaf. Arousing Sibylla would, with luck, transform a good review into a rave one.

The besotted critic had by now progressed with ten fingers towards Zafir's upper thigh, her sense of propriety squelched by the urgent need of the moment. Her sharply pointed fingernails, painted in purple and dappled with gold, scratched Zafir who, though immune to her libidinous intentions, was not immune to the discomfort her nails were causing.

Out of the blue, the erotic charge that pervaded the room was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"It's me, Henryck. How are you doing, Zafir? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, come in," said Zafir, hastily standing up and adjusting his kimono. "Henryck, I'd like you to meet Sibylla Smith from *The Dancing World*."

"We've already met," he said politely, aware as well that her article in the London-based magazine would carry considerable weight. He also sensed that the critic had found his Syrian attraction a decided turn on.

Sibylla, trying to camouflage her frustration, gathered up her notebook, pen and cassette tape recorder and shoved them into her shoulder bag. Sneaking a last-moment glance at herself in the naked-bulbed mirror, she shook Zafir's hand, and then repeated the formality with Henryck. Each further second of deliberate delay added to the awkwardness of the tense atmosphere. Retrieving the remnants of her crumpled dignity, she waved goodbye to both, then left, her high heels clicking their way down the corridor.

Zafir audibly exhaled a sigh of relief that the amorous lady had left, for he had begun to feel like a lap dancer or, worse, a male whore thrusting himself forward in one of those Amsterdam shop windows.

Henryck smiled knowingly at Zafir's predicament, then began to help him get on with the business of packing his make-up and costumes. With a quick look in the closets, the costume racks and under the make-up table, Zafir was now sure that he hadn't left anything behind.

Saying a warm good night to Henryck, he walked rapidly back to the hotel. By now he was feeling the full brunt of the brouhaha that had preceded his Festival appearance.

Declining Henryck's thoughtful invitation to dinner, though invariably famished at the end of a performance, he didn't feel like eating anything, not even to nibble on the

chocolate bar he carried with him. Instead, he thought that after leaving his costumes and make-up in his hotel room, he would take a short walk along one of the canals, thereby stabilizing his frazzled nerve endings.

A quarter of an hour later, having deposited his performance suitcase and make-up bag in his room, he exited the Hotel Zandbergen and began ambling along the adjacent canal. Amsterdam was by now enveloped in the hushed silence to be found when a bustling city has subsided to a nocturnal standstill.

He looked down at his reflection in the dark waters, trying to decipher what this latest upheaval with the pickets signified. What was he doing wrong, what could he do to avert such threatening reactions in the immediate present and future? Staring into the still waters of the old canal, he suddenly noticed the reflection of a young man standing brazenly close to him. The proximity of the stranger both intrigued and intimidated him, for he suddenly got the message that he had been unknowingly followed.

Zafir looked away from their contingent images in the water, then, hesitantly yielding to his curiosity, turned his head to face the man himself. When their mutual gaze connected, the man inched his way closer to Zafir and smiled.

## Chapter Ten

### Reflections in a Still Canal

“Good evening,” said Zafir tentatively.

“Hi there, friend, my name is Luke,” the young man jauntily answered in what seemed to Zafir an accent straight out of American movies.

“Are you from America?” queried Zafir, knowing full well he was, but trying to place which part.

“Yeah, I sure am. I’m from good old Alabama,” confirming for Zafir that he was speaking to a dyed-in-the-wool southerner with its fiery echoes of Ku Klux Klan lynching parties. And the name Luke; wasn’t that a name from the New Testament in the Bible?

They shook hands and Zafir noticed immediately that Luke’s arms were heavily decorated with tattoos, but didn’t give it much further thought since body decoration had long been the rage for youth all over the world, including women. Then he noticed that a tattooed rattlesnake was crawling up from Luke’s shoulder to his uncovered neck. The fashionable had slid into the sinister.

Over one shoulder hung the kind of bag that athletes carry going to and from practice. Yet this Luke didn’t come across at all as a man who spent any time training in the gym.

“Are you staying around here?” questioned Luke, not asking which part of the world he was from, a usual first question among strangers meeting abroad.

“Yes, at a nearby hotel,” answered Zafir, deliberately omitting the name. There was something very off-putting about this guy, he thought, something in his aura suggesting danger. Or were his runaway thoughts getting the better of him? Why, he asked himself belatedly, had he established the initial contact? Surely he had more important things to do

with his life than playing Russian roulette with ugly pick-ups.

But the thrill of the late night gamble in a foreign land won out. “What are you doing in Amsterdam?” asked Zafir, venturing further out onto the ledge.

“I’m here with a group from my home town of Montgomery and we’re doing a week’s course in advanced Bible studies. You can never know too much about our Lord Christ Almighty.”

“Oh, I see,” answered Zafir, not being able to reconcile the study of Jesus with picking up strangers along midnight Dutch canals. They continued to walk, albeit in a menacing silence, until they reached a lone park bench which Luke pointed out, gesturing for them to sit down.

Luke’s left arm, Zafir couldn’t help but register, though he tried not to stare, had the obligatory biker’s insignia, a swastika, an Iron Cross and a skull and bones, all of them intimidating images which were their intention. But suddenly, Zafir’s eyes caught more than the aggressive words of *hate*, *hell* and *Satan* on his right forearm, but a full sentence that screeched out, JESUS HATES GAYS.

Zafir’s blood froze to ice while the pit of his stomach felt like it had been struck with an iron fist. This bigot sitting next to him had been one of the protesters outside the theatre before the performance began, one of the group with the placards of hate, one of that very same bunch of homophobes distributing leaflets extolling violent death to all gay men.

This Luke knew exactly who he was and had been waiting for him to leave the theatre and then follow him to wherever he was staying.

It now hit Zafir with the force of lightning that the tattooed stranger sitting beside him, their thighs already touching, had been, after his release from the police station, sent to hook him; human bait for the hungry fish, a honey trap for the desperate and unaware.

Did this roughneck plan to beat him up or even kill him, then toss his body into one of the canals? Zafir had read that during the Nazi occupation of Holland, it was not uncommon for the Christian population, cycling to work in the early morning, to see the floating corpses of Jews in the canals; bloated, purplish-blue bodies drifting through the polluted waters, some face down, some face up staring sightless into the black, fetid face of eternity.

As if in answer to a desperate prayer, Zafir saw a passing police car. Frantically waving it down and shouting at the top of his lungs for it to stop, the car ground to a halt.

At the first sight of the police, Luke began running into the protective darkness as one of the officers in the car jumped out and set off, revolver in hand, in pursuit of him. Luke, quickly apprehended, was harshly pushed to the ground with a headlock, then handcuffed. While he struggled violently on the ground, the shoulder bag he had been carrying was yanked off his neck by one of the policemen.

Simultaneously, the other officer let Zafir into the car where he began to pour out his tale of threat and intimidation by the pickets outside the theatre and, now, being stalked by one of their ringleaders, Luke.

The gay basher from Alabama, now under arrest, at first refused to concede any guilt whatsoever, protesting that he lived only for Jesus and would die for Jesus, that despite the accusations being hurled at him, was totally innocent of any wrongdoing.

As he was denying any guilt, the shoulder bag he had carried had been immediately taken into an adjoining room, its contents spread across a table pierced by overhead spotlights. The bag emptied, the investigating officers had their worst suspicions confirmed when they saw on the table a travelling arsenal of death. There before them, under their very noses, were electrical timers, weed-killer, firework powder, two tennis balls with diagrams on how to convert

them into shrapnel bombs, and detonators.

The officers came rushing back into the room where Luke was being held, had a few hurried words with their colleagues, then ordered Luke to divest himself of all his clothing. Even the hardened Dutch officers were repulsed to see his body completely covered in tattoos; from the pubic hair upward to his neck, and from the groin to his feet.

The only article they allowed him to keep on was a large crucifix on a gold chain, incongruously dangling from his neck against the tattooed statement on his chest: JESUS LOVES HITLER.

The tattoos, deeply embedded into his skin, were also of bats, pitchforks, lizards, hangmen's nooses, knives, barbed wire and skeletons, an Edgar Allen Poe conglomeration of terror symbols.

Under pressure that stopped just short of manhandling, and after three hours of relentless questioning, Luke confessed that he had arrived in Holland, not for extended Bible studies, as initially claimed, but to foster his ten commandments of hatred in what his church group saw as too liberal Holland. Hell-land, they spelled it.

One of the older policemen, the officer in charge, who had been a child during the Nazi occupation of Holland, could contain his anger no longer. With a hard thump across Luke's chest, he snarled at him,

"Get dressed, you fucking little Hitler lover, we're going to throw the book at you!"

With or without his clothing, the Dutch police saw Luke for what he was; not just a public agitator, but a crucifix-carrying terrorist who was dead set on murdering and maiming as many people as possible.

The malodorous cesspool of death-inflicting white supremacists, with the likes of Luke as a cunning decoy, had invaded and infested the land of Anne Frank, Rembrandt and Vincent van Gogh.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Visitor

Back in one piece in Damascus, Zafir walked to the airport car park where he had left his Volkswagen, got into the car and drove to his apartment in the Dahyet Kudsaya section of the city. He was enormously relieved and grateful to be home, inwardly thanking his lucky star as he parked. Now, after having been informed by the Dutch police that he had been minutes away from being murdered by a man carrying a mobile bomb factory, he began to feel the tremors of a delayed panic attack.

Once inside his memento-filled surroundings, he did some yoga exercises to calm his severely frayed nerve endings. Then, to further distract himself, he began unpacking his luggage, starting to separate the costumes to be washed from his dirty laundry. Checking his emails so as to block out from his mind the Dutch experience, he saw that most of the messages were Viagra-styled junk. He then started to contact his dancers so that their next rehearsals could be organized.

Patricia, as she had announced, had returned to London during his brief Dutch sojourn. Thinking of her, he felt the loss of her always reliable close friendship, for he had grown to lean on her more than he had realized. She was, he knew, his security blanket, his anchorage, but the bond that had evolved between them had left far in the distance their original self-protective intentions.

Washing his costume for *Symbols* by hand in lukewarm sudsy water, his mind darted back to Dieter Johnson who, while in Damascus, had been so forthcoming and encouraging. Why, he questioned himself, had he responded to such an artist and his masterful work in such a high-handed manner? What was he trying to prove; that to

acknowledge someone else's achievement was to minimize his own, that he was sufficient unto himself and needed no one to either inspire or assist him in the crater-filled domain of the dance world?

Dieter, a man of wide renown, had shown interest in him and given him much of his limited time in allowing him to watch his class and rehearsal. Even on a personal level, the German choreographer at first seemed very responsive. To the last day of their brief encounter, Dieter had shown him more sympathy and understanding than his outspoken opinions merited.

What had gone wrong with such a promising start to such a potentially fruitful contact? He knew the answer, but didn't know if he'd be capable of carrying out the necessary alterations to what had become his embedded character.

After rinsing the costume, he filled the washing machine with his underwear, socks, jeans and practice clothes. The steady whir of the machine's motor served as a familiar background as he also turned on his CD player to listen to some music for the new ballet he had in mind.

Neither the rotating soaking clothes nor the ethnic Turkish music he had chosen to listen to blotted out his zigzagging and tumultuous thoughts. Try as he might, he could not obliterate the awareness of his by now compulsive habit of alienating all those who initially were drawn to him. Attempting to reach the root of his self-destructive actions, he sat on the edge of the bathtub staring at his clothes being washed through the opaque glass window. Like his laundry, he was going endlessly around in circles. His clothes, he could see, would soon be clean, but his reputation had long been stained.

Why, he berated himself, did he invariably make allies waste no time in crossing him out of their telephone books and deleting him from their emails?

Why, when people spoke of him, did they describe him as full of hubris, arrogant and combative? Why, when he was made aware that he had seriously offended Dieter, didn't he have the humility to apologize? Why couldn't he tread softly and not rampage like a bull in a china closet?

What had possessed him to once threaten to walk out on the most respected management, and then carry out that threat when his unreasonable demands weren't immediately met?

How could he change himself, could he do it alone, who else was around to help him, who would *want* to help him? What lesson could he learn from his most recent run-in with the critic Fahad Hassan, an encounter that his compulsive behaviour had escalated into a battle royal?

And far worse, how could he protect himself from the dangerous bigots he had just come across in Amsterdam, those far right Bible-thumpers, those ugly Christian fundamentalists, legateses of late night lynch mobs who had threatened, if not to hang him, to dump him in a Dutch canal?

Was he really a dancing advertisement for sinful activities or was he just a convenient scapegoat for post Ku Klux Klan viciousness? He had become aware that people on witch hunts, when they can't find one, invent one.

Minutes after the washing machine had come to a halt, he opened its door and began hanging up the laundry. He was thoroughly depleted, not so much from the recent performance, but much more so from the confrontation with the protesters and his unexpected encounter with the vengeful Luke. Then there was the flight itself, always fatiguing and dehydrating. Luckily he had had the foresight to stock up the fridge with a few bottles of water and fruit juice.

He poured himself a welcome glass of water in which he squeezed a sliver of lemon, then shut the fridge door. Tomorrow morning, he decided, he had better start defrosting. The fridge was far too cold and the ice in the

freezer was crowding the frozen vegetables. He didn't like defrosting because even when he strategically placed towels on the floor, there were still puddles of water all over the kitchen.

Domestic duties put aside, he resumed his relentless self-interrogation. Why, he berated himself, did he react aggressively towards those funding organizations that had rejected his applications?

Yet he knew very well that he had frequently been the recipient of governmental funding, most recently for the trip to the Dutch dance festival. Why couldn't he accept the fact that his success rate was high and that no one could always be on a winning streak?

His background, he reminded himself, was stable, his mother a kindergarten teacher, his father a professor of mathematics. The third of three children, and the only boy, he had always had close relationships with his parents and sisters.

One family holiday, in particular, at the Dead Sea in Jordan in 1979, remained etched in his memory with the tang of salt, bracing brown mud, sharp pebbles in the water and the summer sun that made him squint. To offset the heat, his mother had bought him a chocolate ice cream cone that quickly melted and dripped, his sticky hands and mouth then gently wiped clean by his father with a Mickey Mouse towel.

Throughout the merging and overlapping seasons, he was, he knew, the product of an enlightened upbringing, his parents having always encouraged him to dance when his interest quickly evolved into an all-consuming passion.

Eventually that passion to dance was circumvented by career concerns, the need to establish himself in the public eye, the need to make and maintain a name for himself in the cultural hierarchy. This need, he admitted to himself, began to discolour the earlier pure joy of dancing for dancing's sake alone. Imperceptibly, the practical aspects of

his ambition began to sully the untouched innocence of his beginnings.

Understanding his inner conflicts, however, did not control them. He now had no choice but to confess to himself that for too long he had been coasting on his charm, looks and natural aptitude, mistakenly thinking such blessings had given him *carte blanche* to behave like a steam roller.

Just then his land phone rang, cutting him off from his in-depth self-inquisition, but when he answered the phone, there was no voice on the other end, just an eerie silence. Wrong number, he thought.

Too tired by now to focus on anything, he took out his two mobiles from his jacket pocket and placed them, as he always did, in the centre of his night table. The circular silver key holder he carried in his inner jacket pocket, that irreplaceable ring from which dangled the keys to his apartment, rehearsal studio and car, was placed in the centre of his adjacent desk. Almost by rote as he continued his evening ritual, he removed from his shoulder bag his digital camera, placing it as well on the crowded desk.

Checking his laptop for any more late night messages, he quickly read three welcome home emails from his dancers. Without a pause, he set his alarm clock for 8 o'clock in the morning, then went into the kitchen to double check that the stove was off. An automatic walk into the bathroom followed where he hastily brushed his teeth then urinated, almost missing the bowl because his mind was still adrift, still sending up emergency flares, none of which had been answered.

His nightly pattern attended to, he got undressed then slipped under the duvet. Exhausted, he dropped off into a deep and urgently needed sleep.

After an indeterminate time, he thought he heard his doorbell ringing, punctuated by a knocking that increased in persistence. His first reaction was that he was dreaming and

for a few seconds he ignored the sound. But when the pounding didn't abate, he glanced at his clock and saw that it was just past 2 a.m. Who could it be, he thought, at this ungodly hour?

Zafir got out of bed, quickly put on his briefs, walked quickly to the door and asked who it was.

"It's Khattab."

"Who?"

"Khattab, from the souk. You remember me, we met the other night. Come on, let me in."

"Are you out of your mind coming here so late?"

"No, I just wanted to welcome you home."

"How did you know I was back?"

"I recognized your car down the street. Come on, I'm not leaving until you let me in for a few minutes."

Zafir was caught in a whirlpool of indecision. He had no desire to open the door to this suspicious stranger, uninvited and at so late an hour, and yet he knew that Khattab's voice from the hallway would awaken his next door neighbours.

"Come on, Zafir, let me in, I won't stay long."

"No, whatever you want to tell me can wait until tomorrow."

"I want to see you now, Zafir!"

"I said no! Will you please leave, you're waking up the neighbours!"

"No, I'm not leaving until you let me in!"

Zafir, in his hasty decision to end the ruckus in the building corridor, unlocked the door, then opened it just wide enough to see Khattab standing there with a hold-all in his hand. Wearing black jeans and a black zippered jacket to the waist, around his head he wore a black bandana, pirate-style, punctuated by a glittering stud in his earlobe.

Pushing the door wide open, Khattab entered the apartment, then, without a second's pause, closed the door behind him.

"I read that you had a big success at a dance festival in Amsterdam and that you were returning tonight. Well, last night actually."

"What's so urgent that you had to wake me up and probably some of the neighbours as well?"

"I just wanted to see you," Khattab muttered without any conviction. Without further ado, he slipped Zafir's underpants down below his hips, dropped to his knees and began to brush his lips on and around his navel. Zafir was too ill at ease to feel anything but the scratchy stubble of Khattab's several days' growth of beard. He brusquely asked him to stop, and when he didn't, pushed him aside trying at the same time to yank up his underwear. Khattab, reacting to Zafir's disinterest, roughly pulled him back to his bed.

"You're tired, I can see. Let's go to sleep and we can talk in the morning."

"No," protested Zafir. "I want you to go now and if you want to talk to me, we can arrange it for another time."

His visitor had other ideas and shoved him back on to the bed. Khattab, still fully dressed, lay down beside him.

Zafir was blanketed by a mixture of acute apprehension escalating into chilling fear. He was lying beside a stranger who seemed abnormally tense and totally disinterested in sex. At this late hour and after his last nerve-wracking days in Amsterdam, Zafir was trying to cope with exhaustion, yet despite his torpor, fought to stay awake. Some inner and insistent voice was warning him not to, under any circumstances, fall asleep. Was it Patricia's voice, also warning him to stay clear of dangerous rough trade, all of whom would have ulterior motives?

The seconds ticked by, yet despite his severe misgivings, a drowsiness he could no longer keep at bay

proceeded to inexorably take hold of him. In no time at all, he had unwillingly surrendered to the obliterating cloak of sleep that overcame him.

It was the early morning of 12th November 2008.

Zafir lay there, immune to any signs of life he knew so well from the 33 years he had walked the earth. In the jumbled world of dreams, he skimmed across a landscape of mystifying images, until the muffled sound of nearby objects being shifted jolted him out of his weighted slumber. The space next to him, earlier occupied by Khattab, was empty.

In one horrified glance, Zafir registered that his mobiles, digital camera and laptop were not where he had placed them earlier and in a split second of awareness knew that they had been piled into Khattab's hold-all.

"What are you doing?" Zafir blurted out, now fully awake and terrifyingly aware of what was taking place. He was being robbed by the intruder who had targeted him at their first meeting at the souk and was now carrying out his plan of an easy haul.

"Stop! Leave my things alone! Get out of here, get out of here this second!"

"Shut up and get back to sleep, you fucking faggot!" hissed Khattab.

Zafir, with a reflex reaction, obeyed his immediate instincts, sprang out of bed and pushed Khattab away from his desk and night table. In response, the intruder, with lightning speed, slammed Zafir back on to the bed, causing his head to bang loudly against the wall. Stunned, Zafir managed to get up again, but in the few seconds interim, Khattab had grabbed a canister of gas that he had hidden in his hold-all and sprayed it, full force, directly into Zafir's face.

Choking from the poisonous fumes, Zafir fell back on the bed, desperately gasping for air, clutching at his throat, his legs and arms flailing about on the bed in his panic-struck

realization that, more than his possessions, his survival was at stake.

Khattab watched as his victim continued to struggle. Impatient to inflict further pain, Khattab swiftly bent over Zafir and grabbed his right hand, pushing it back with maximum force until the bones of his fingers snapped in the agonized and screaming semi-darkness. Dropping Zafir's broken hand, he forcefully thrust back his other hand until he heard the ominous cracking sound repeated, Zafir's cries now a rasping, guttural sound.

Though in excruciating pain, Zafir called upon his ebbing life force to roll off the bed. Battling at all costs to stand up, he staggered across the room towards the door, howling in desperation for help.

Once again the intruder hurriedly plunged his hand into his hold-all, now given weight by Zafir's possessions, and pulled out an ornamental knife, the kind sold in souks to Western tourists who purchase antique weapons from the Middle East for wall adornments.

Lurching from one side of the room to another, Zafir fell heavily to his knees, gasping for breath as he crawled on all fours to reach the door. Khattab, as a panther in wait, jumped on Zafir's back, straddling him while flattening him out on to his stomach. He then pulled him up to a kneeling position and, instantaneously standing behind him, jerked his head back by the hair. Seizing his ornamental knife, Khattab ferociously proceeded to slash Zafir's carotid arteries.

A geyser of blood spouted from the victim's slit throat, splattering the rug while Khattab grabbed the last of his victim's unclaimed possessions, his silver ring of keys.

Zafir was by now motionless, but Khattab, in his orgy of bloodletting, wanted to be certain he was dead. With a frenzied rapidity fuelled by a tidal wave of hatred, he thrust his hand into the hold-all, withdrawing the inflammable liquid heptanoic acid. Dousing Zafir from head to toe, he struck a

match to the bloodied body. The fire would, he planned, eliminate any clues or evidence. To be doubly sure, he sprayed what was left of the heptanoic acid across Zafir's bed, knowing it would immediately torch the entire room.

The killer, clutching his hold-all, raced to the street as the darting orange flames began to ravenously envelop the apartment, the acrid and choking smoke filling the corridors of the entire building. By now the neighbours were shouting and screaming hysterically for help, frantically alerting both the police and fire departments. Within minutes, the building was swarming with a contingent of both, the firefighters extinguishing the flames before the entire building turned into a raging inferno.

The tenants of the building, many of them still in their night clothes, huddled together on the street. They were by now frighteningly aware that something catastrophic had taken place in Zafir's apartment, precipitating the fire that had threatened their lives.

As the neighbours stood together, rooted to the spot, the police chased Khattab down the street as he clambered into Zafir's car. In a do-or-die effort to escape, the killer got no further than slamming the Volkswagen's door. He had been apprehended, Zafir's few hi-tech possessions protruding from the maniacal spoils of his hold-all.

In the nearby apartment, the firemen were still hosing the funeral pyre, the dead man's smoking and half charred remains bearing no resemblance to the classic Adonis that Zafir, in life, once was.

## Chapter Twelve

### In the Midst of Life

Zafir's horrendous death caused shockwaves throughout Syria and was reported widely in the international dance magazines, not so much because of his impact in the dance world, which was still negligible, but due to his grotesquely savage end. It was the general consensus of opinion that whatever his limitations were as a human being, he did not deserve to die a death of such malevolence.

In Dresden, since the January 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States, Dieter had been basking in the euphoric aftermath of such an unprecedented victory. In the echo of the American Civil War, never having completely silenced, such a political triumph seemed forever impossible. But the miracle, against all odds, had occurred.

Obama, now the most powerful man on the planet, shared the same ethnic background as himself, a black father and a white mother. He was a beacon of hope to the world, for he embodied unsullied idealism, cultivated intellect and inborn compassion.

The thud of a heavy envelope being pushed through his apartment mail slot intruded into Dieter's contented thoughts. He went to the door and picked up the heavy envelope which he could see contained a copy of the popular German dance magazine *Ballett Heute*. Flipping through the pages to see which companies and dancers were being highlighted in this issue, he stopped short on page 58 when, stunned and startled, he came across the screeching headline:

SYRISCHER TÄNZER BRUTAL ERMORDET

Zafir had been savagely murdered some two months earlier in November! He reeled back in denial and disbelief, rejecting the shock finality of the sordid typeface. Why? How? To find out more details than were to be found in the publication, he at once accessed the Internet and read a short paragraph by the Syrian News Agency. Neither article, in the magazine or Internet, gave more than the basic facts, leaving Dieter the unsettling choice of conjecture. Though he had not been in contact with Zafir for several years, the news of his death dislodged him.

That morning Dieter was scheduled to rehearse a revival of *Le Corsair*, but his jumbled state of mind dissolved his required focus. Needing some time to collect himself, he phoned his ballet mistress and told her to begin the rehearsal without him. He then hurriedly went to the largest bookshop in Dresden and bought a copy of the English dance magazine, *The Dancing World*.

Under ordinary circumstances he only skimmed through the publication to see if there were any reports on his company, for he found the magazine written with an annoying absence of any literary value. At times, in fact, its contributors trampled roughshod over the English language. The colour photographs, he had to concede, were outstanding, but all in all, he was further put off by the response of the primarily female critics to leading male dancers. In almost every issue, there was a noticeable absence of decorum, for the women had few, if any, compunctions about publicly salivating over their male idols, none more so than for the Cuban star, Carlos Acosta.

But these responses took a back seat as Dieter began reading the obituary on Zafir, written by Sibylla Smith, the woman who had previously interviewed Zafir in Amsterdam. It was the leading obituary, highlighted by a colour photo of him scantily attired, one of his splayed fingers pointing to the

tip of his manhood, its outline just visible under the clinging peach-coloured fabric.

The photo was juxtaposed next to the less prominent obituary of the renowned prima ballerina Rosella Hightower who had died at the age of 88. Though once partner to Rudolf Nureyev and director of the Paris Opera Ballet, her obituary was placed under Zafir's, unaccompanied by a photo.

In the obituary, Sibylla Smith had written that Zafir had been criticized in the past for overly displaying the body and for his style being too expressive. Dieter took exception to this misinformation, for it was only Zafir's *own* body that he enjoyed flaunting. But then, to be fair, in other parts of the world, no one would have thought twice about it.

As far as being too expressive, Dieter never read or heard such drivel. Specifically, what Zafir expressed was a thinly concealed same-sex libido and in that part of the world, such an exhibition was strictly taboo.

Included in Sibylla Smith's obituary was her statement, trying to fathom the murder, that Zafir had no enemies, nor was his hideous death politically motivated.

How did *she* know? How did she know anything? How did she presume to write so authoritatively when she had never even been to Syria and knew nothing about Zafir's life except for the brief contact they had had in his Dutch dressing room?

Dieter, subsequent to the festival, had been in touch with Henryck regarding a future Dutch presentation of the Dresdner Ballett. In the course of their negotiations, Dieter had been updated by the impresario on Zafir's impact in Amsterdam. This included his entanglement with the pickets, and even Sibylla's futile advances.

Mulling over Henryck's information, Dieter came to the conclusion that Sibylla's obituary had been sanitized. The journalist, still smitten with the victim, had met him for not

more than half an hour and, during that time, only on a superficial level. To write that he had no enemies was a blatant distortion of fact.

The truth of the matter was that Zafir's artistic and personal needs, once a force for career progression, had done a U-turn. Like a child absorbed in spinning a top, Zafir had similarly tried to spin the globe around his own obsessive axis, but the globe turned out to be more unwieldy than the toy.

Nonetheless, no matter how many people Zafir had crossed, no matter how many people took umbrage at his thick-skinned self-image, one could not come to terms with his harrowing murder.

Many people, Dieter believed, can be faulted with an excess of narcissism, but that is no reason to have suffered such a ferocious death. What was the reason? There was none. Zafir unknowingly had placed his life on a gaming table, the gamble proving to be the final throw of the fatal dice.

How can a human being, Dieter asked himself to no avail, born of a woman, perpetrate an act of such heinous dimensions? Was there not an iota of identification with the terrified plight of another fellow creature, so similar to ourselves? What reversal of civilized response had so atrophied that such a barbaric action could take place?

Dieter's ballet *Faces of Evil* tragically proved to be prophetic, for twisted psyches do circulate among us, restlessly and invisibly in wait to maim the innocent and unsuspecting.

Zafir's murderer, when interrogated, claimed that he had known the victim for five years, having once been a member of his dance company. The dancers in *Taamulat*, however, vehemently refuted this, for none of them had ever heard of him or ever come across him. Without wanting to corroborate

Zafir's late night strolls, they all agreed that the killer was a stranger.

The convoluted brain of such a psychopath cannot be deciphered. Perhaps he thought in his perverse rationale that knowing the victim somewhat mitigated his grisly crime.

On 20th December 2008, a memorial performance had taken place at the Dar al-Assad Opera House in Damascus in which the tragic dancer's still mourning troupe, *Taamulat*, had participated. Excerpts from his choreography were shown, interspersed with grief-laden speeches of tribute, the first of which was from the company manager, Ulfat Rihawi.

"To those of you among us who speak no Arabic, I will point out that the name of Zafir's company was *Taamulat*, which in English means *reflections*. As we all now reflect on what Zafir, had he lived, could have yet accomplished, we bewail his future that was not to be. For he was planning a work based on the intense exchange of letters between the incomparable Lebanese writer and mystic, Khalil Gibran, and his American patroness and beloved friend, Mary Haskell. With the death of Zafir al-Ziad, in the midsummer of his life, that most worthy and exalted project must now remain unrealized.

"As for Zafir's immediate family, we commiserate with them in their profound anguish, for they remain, to this day, distraught and inconsolable.

"During this desolate period of torment and bereavement, let us be grateful for the brief light and beauty that Zafir al-Ziad did succeed in bestowing upon us."

Among the other eulogies was one from his former girlfriend, Patricia Andrews, who had managed to return to Damascus in order to pay her final respects.

"Words are woefully inadequate to convey my sense of personal pain and devastation. Zafir was snatched from us far too early and in a manner that we cannot and will never understand. Had he died of an illness or an accident, we

could eventually attempt to come to terms with either of those premature tragedies. However, the utter horror of his barbaric death must not obscure the bountiful beauty of his life, a meaningful life that fed and always reinforced our own. Dear Zafir, may whatever power that exists in the vast unknown guide you as you move through measureless time. *Inshallah.*”

When Patricia reached the end of her tribute, concluding with *God willing* in Arabic, the cultural community of Damascus, attending the commemoration of Zafir’s curtailed life, remained motionless in their seats. Whatever misgivings some of the mourners had once harboured in regard to the victim’s life, in the bleak aftermath of his abhorrent death the late Syrian dancer was absolved of his perceived shortcomings.

Patricia had returned to her seat in the front row, engulfed by a kaleidoscope of swirling images, all vying for prominence in her uncomprehending mind. As if it were only yesterday, she recalled their first meeting in Kyoto, and, in the days of discovery that followed, their buoyant and youthful hope as they strolled through the rock gardens of an earlier and ancient Japan.

In that hushed theatre of aching loss, there were those who, as Patricia, through their tears, could envision Zafir al-Ziad still dancing, still, as ever, glowing like a luminous gold ornament in their constant and loving midst.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I offer my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Riad Ismat, whose championship of my life in art began in 1976 when he interviewed me on nationwide television in Damascus. He is, himself, the ranking Syrian playwright, director and critic and has, in the course of his illustrious career, been Syria's Ambassador to Pakistan.

Since much of this book is set against the panorama of the Middle East, I thank my Jordanian friends and colleagues Lina Attel, Rania Kamhawi and Reem Arida of the Performing Arts Center in Amman. Their careful explanation of the nuances of the Arabic language ensures the accuracy of those passages.

Still in this part of the world, I venture to Beirut to acknowledge the young Lebanese Rami Abou Dargham for guiding me through the grandeur of the Roman ruins of Baalbeck.

I also convey my thanks to the Syrian artist Zouhier Al Arabi for his striking cover design.

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To the distinguished British author Kay Hunter, my indebtedness for her generous Foreword.

With several chapters of this novella set in Holland, my mind is drawn to the incomparable diarist, Anne Frank, and her father, Otto Frank. During the many years of my friendship with Mr. Frank, I always felt the presence of history's tingling breeze.

My appreciation, additionally, to the praiseworthy Finnish dancer and choreographer, Thomas Freundlich, whose manifold skills further encompass an exceptional editorial precision.

And, above all, my abiding gratitude, since 1979, to the world-class dancer, mime artist and director, Kazimir Kolesnik, who prompted me to write this novella. His belief and ongoing suggestions for the manuscript have helped me to infuse the pulse of life into *Death in Damascus*.

## About the Author

“Jean Gaspard Debureau, Etienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Marcel Marceau, Adam Darius and Anatoliy Yelizarov;” so wrote the Russian Wikipedia in their listing of the six greatest mime artists since the 19th century.

Born in New York City of Turkish and Russian ancestry, Adam Darius’s early training included the inspired teaching of Olga Preobrajenska, Bronislava Nijinska, Anatole Oboukhov and Pierre Vladimirov. Subsequently, Adam Darius joined several international ballet companies. During the course of his choreographic career, Adam Darius’s most celebrated works were *The Anne Frank Ballet* (with exclusive permission from Anne’s father, Otto Frank) and *Marilyn*, an evening-length dance drama based on the life of the iconic film star.

Since evolving his own fusion of dramatic dance and expressive mime, Adam Darius has been applauded on the major stages of over 80 countries. From Afghanistan to Argentina, and from Madagascar to Indonesia, he is universally acclaimed as the pre-eminent and peerless mime tragedian.

He is, additionally, the dance world’s most prolific author, having written 21 plays and 13 books, the subjects of which encompass autobiography, novels, poetry, philosophy, theatre training and bereavement counselling for animal lovers.

Adam Darius’s physical theatre productions, in collaboration with his long-time multi-gifted colleague, Kazimir Kolesnik, include *Rimbaud and Verlaine*, *Yukio Mishima*, *A Snake in the Grass*, in addition to the ballet *James Dean* for which he provided the scenario and direction, with choreography by Thomas Freundlich.

Among the many illustrious artists who have studied emotional release and expressive mime with Adam Darius are the former Finnish National Ballet director Dinna Bjorn, the former Royal Danish Ballet director, Frank Andersen, Hollywood star Kate Beckinsale, rock star Kate Bush and actors Sir Tom Courtenay and Warren Mitchell. The playwright Dr. Riad Ismat,

when director of the Syrian Academy of Dramatic Arts, taught the Adam Darius method to several generations of local actors.

In the course of his expansive career, Adam Darius has collaborated with the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, France's greatest actor Jean-Louis Barrault of *Les Enfants du Paradis* fame, the Spanish tenor Placido Domingo, for whom he choreographed four operas, and the Belgian singer Jacques Brel, with whom he toured Israel.

In the Middle East, the setting for this novella, Adam Darius has moved audiences in the Syrian capital of Damascus; Teheran, Isfahan and Shiraz in Iran; Amman in Jordan; Beirut in Lebanon; and Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv in Israel. In neighbouring North Africa, he has quickened the pulse of people in Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt; Casablanca and Rabat in Morocco; and Tunis, Sousse, La Marsa and Le Kef in Tunisia.

The numerous honours accorded Adam Darius include an American Television Emmy, the Shetland Dance and Mime Award, Italy's Premio Positano Leonide Massine, the Festival du Rire Trophy in Lebanon and, on two occasions, the Noor Al Hussein Award in Jordan.

In a programme devoted to his career, the BBC World Service in London stated, "Adam Darius is one of the most exceptional talents of the 20th century".

At the invitation of the director of the Dansmuseet in Stockholm, Dr. Erik Näslund, Adam Darius has donated the archives of his career to this most prestigious of Europe's dance museums.

Most recently, the Royal Academy of Dance in London has acquired Adam Darius's collection of historical dance memorabilia.