

WORSE THAN MURDER

by Stephen Wechselblatt

EXCERPT

Blue and gay patterned carpet muffles my steps as I move through Mexico City's airport. I glance at the faces of people sitting and waiting for their flights. The silent ones with features frozen into stillness, the young mothers following their toddlers up and down the walkway and shooing them from the moving stairs where they're likely to trip, and the teenagers laughing together with their companions. But I'm alone. The faces I see are the faces of strangers.

Phyllis never texted me back. I fear the worst; that I'm too late, the bombing has already happened. But maybe –

I trip over a duffle bag someone left on the floor. I see a pair of shiny black shoes and black slacks. I look up and see a slender, youngish man with a long black coat, curly sideburns and a wispy beard. He stretches out a pale arm to help me up, but I feel an odd reluctance to take it, a frisson of fear, as if it's not really flesh and bone.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asks.

"I'm fine. I wonder whose bag this is."

"No, I mean your friend. You're returning for her funeral. "

"What?" *Oh God. Phyllis is dead.* "How do you know?"

"The way your eyes stare. And the slant of your shoulders."

Icy fingers flutter along my spine. "Who are you?"

His eyes shine like lanterns. "Face the future with courage. Great work is ahead that only you can accomplish."

My mouth goes slack. Why trust the tongue that moves so smoothly from thoughts of death to predictions of greatness?

But then, I think, what's so great about greatness? I've brought a dead man back to life. Fought an immortal demon. And he can't possibly imagine guess how these memories and responsibilities continue to weigh on me.

I take a deep, cleansing breath..” You don't know me at all.”

“Not yet.” He smiles. His teeth are pearly white. He winks, turns away, and vanishes in the passing stream of strangers with the luggage I'd tripped on.

He'd stopped me on purpose. But why? He was a messenger without a clear message. He promised great things. Maybe that meant finding out why the attack occurred. Maybe it meant something else. Or maybe it meant nothing at all. Now that he was gone I wasn't sure he'd even been there. He was less real, less tangible, than Aishe, my spirit mentor.

I adjust the strap of my carry-on bag and continue walking. The faces around me take on a wolfish hue. Even the children. A little girl throws the head of a doll into the air and catches it again and again. A boy with an untied shoelace grinds his sneaker into the carpet, leaving the smudge of a dead insect.

Wickedness walls me in. I walk on, not looking to the left or right, and speed up as if something's chasing me, hoping the plane to Los Angeles will arrive on time. I pass the endless waiting room, its gray carpet, its round, recessed lights, wishing to be anyplace but here.

To my right is a bank of chairs. A man in jeans reads a newspaper, and I catch a glimpse of the headline. In bold letters it says *ISIS attacks U.S Synagogue -- Greatest Death Toll Since 9-11.*

Hope drains entirely. I'm too late