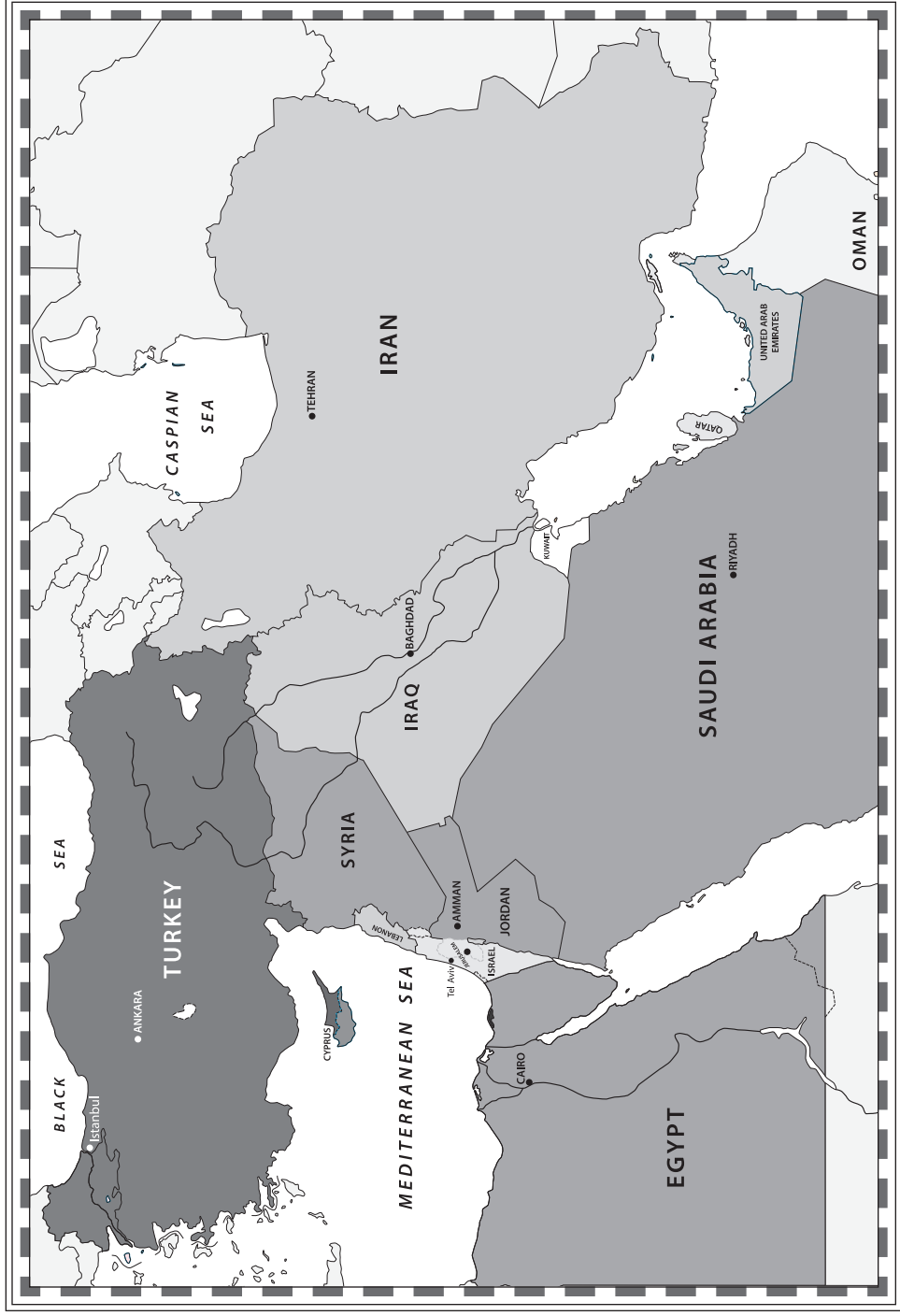




*To my wife, Andrea:
Thanks for being the best part of me
and, after forty years,
for the sweetest season of our marriage*





CAST OF CHARACTERS

United States

Brian Mullaney—Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) agent; regional security officer overseeing the Middle East; chief of security for Joseph Atticus Cleveland, the US ambassador to Israel

Abigail Mullaney—Brian's wife and the daughter of Atlanta-based financial giant Richard Rutherford

Joseph Atticus Cleveland—US ambassador to Turkey transferred to Israel

Palmyra Athena Parker—Ambassador Cleveland's daughter

Tommy Hernandez—DSS chief for Ambassador Cleveland's security detail in Istanbul; transferred with Cleveland to Israel

Lamont Boylan—President of the United States

Evan Townsend—US secretary of state

Noah Webster—Deputy secretary of state for management and resources; oversees DSS

George Morningstar—Deputy assistant secretary for DSS

Arthur Ravel—Deputy secretary of state

Jarrold Goldberg—Deputy chief of mission, US embassy, Tel Aviv

Jon Lin—Head of FBI office, US embassy, Tel Aviv

Ruth Hughes—Political officer, US embassy, Tel Aviv

Jeffrey Archer—Cleveland's secretary at the ambassador's residence in Tel Aviv

Senator Seneca Markham—Former chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, now retired

Richard Rutherford—Billionaire Georgia banker and DC power broker

Israel

David Meir—Prime minister of Israel

Moshe Litzman—Minister of the interior of Israel

Benjamin Erdad—Minister of internal security of Israel

Turkey: Ottoman Empire

Emet Kashani—President of Turkey

Arslan Eroglu—Prime minister of Turkey

The Turk—Otherworldly pursuer of the box and the prophecy

Iraq and Iran: Persian Empire

Samir Al-Qahtani—Deputy prime minister of Iraq; leader of the Badr
Brigades

Muhammad Raman—Chairman, Iran Expediency Council

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine: Islamic Empire

King Abdullah Al-Saud—King of Saudi Arabia

Prince Faisal ibn Farouk Al-Saud—Saudi defense minister; son of King
Abdullah

Sultan Abbaddi—Commander of the Jordanian Royal Guard Brigade, per-
sonal bodyguards of the king and his family



PROLOGUE

Konigsberg, Prussia

1794

This time evil came riding on shafts of lightning, thunder its rapacious roar—torrents of pounding, cold rain hurtled out of the blackened sky for hours on end.

Yehuda pulled his fox-lined cape more tightly around his body, his left hand gripping it securely against his neck, his right hand throbbing in pain as his mule jerked against the reins with every bolt and bellow from the skies. “Papa . . . please. We should seek shelter from this storm.”

The dark shape ahead of him, nearly obscured by the downpour, wrestled his mule to a stop on the narrow, muddy path through the tall pine forest. As Yehuda came alongside in the enveloping blackness of the storm, he didn’t like the look of his aged father—fiery determination in his eyes, yes, but a sallow, sunken exhaustion in his face.

“We push on, Yehuda. We cannot, we must not, turn back again. Tonight, we cross the Prieglius.”

A chest-rattling cough was muted by his expansive white beard as he turned away from his son and kicked his mule forward.

His father was as stubborn as this mule. Yehuda knew his father feared this would be his last opportunity, his last chance to make his desperate pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But the hounds of hell were surely unleashed against them. Evil had stalked their days and threatened their nights ever since they left Vilna, only eight days past. Hooded bandits on black stallions hunted for them in the dense Lithuanian forest, and thieving Gypsies swept down on their camp in the blackness before dawn. Only the sharp eyes and ears of Itzak, his father’s servant, allowed them to escape unharmed. But this rain . . . this rain would not relent.

And neither would this Talmudic scholar.

Yehuda’s aged father was no ordinary pilgrim. Renowned as the Vilna Gaon, or *genius of Vilna*, Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman was a Torah prodigy from the age of seven. As a result of his great wisdom and his extraordinary

comprehension of both Torah and secular knowledge, the often reclusive Gaon spent forty years writing voluminous corrective notes to the ancient texts of his people, particularly the Talmud. Now approaching seventy-four years, Yehuda's father was regarded as the most influential Jewish writer of his time. There was almost no ancient Torah text that did not bear his notes.

But about a year earlier, the Gaon received a vision—a visitation—that turned his focus from the past to the future. The words he wrote down on two sheets of parchment were a pair of prophetic utterances he was convinced were delivered directly from the throne of Yahweh. And all life changed around the Gaon.

Twice before Rabbi Elijah had set out for Jerusalem, and twice he had been forced to retreat back to his home in Vilna, nearly losing his life in each attempt. Yehuda feared this attempt might . . . no, put away those thoughts . . .

Itzak, ever watchful, reached a bend in the path and raised his hand for them to stop. Leaning forward, he inched his mule ahead and disappeared from sight.

Sitting in the darkness, soaked through to his skin, Yehuda's mind conjured up a picture of the hearth at home, his wife, Khana, stirring a huge pot of lamb stew, his seven children and their myriad cousins creating an uproar like the rumble of an avalanche in winter. Wait . . . that sound, that roar was in his ears, not his mind.

"Father, what is that sound?"

The Vilna Gaon hunched his shoulders under his thick cape and seemed to shrink in size. "It is the sound of defeat, I fear."

"Come!" Itzak's urgent command was nearly buried by the mixture of thunder and distant tumult.

Yehuda followed his father's mule around the bend. On the far side he pulled slightly to the right so he could see past his father into the gloom where Itzak stood, holding fast to the reins of his mule.

Behind Itzak, Yehuda could just discern the northern cliff edge of the Prieglius River Gorge, southeast of Konigsberg. Yehuda slid from his mount and stepped quickly to the Gaon's side. With Itzak's help, they eased Rabbi Elijah to the muddy ground. All three turned and, with great care, approached the edge of the cliff.

Several hundred meters below them, the Prieglius River Bridge bellowed

prolonged groans, like a great beast trying to give birth. The river boiled over the bridge in massive, riotous brown waves that crashed and ebbed with growing ferocity. At times, the broad planks of the bridge were thrust to the surface of the raging torrent, at other times the middle section of the bridge disappeared under the rampaging river.

Itzak pointed, fear frozen on his face. "Is that the bridge we plan to cross?"

The Gaon closed his eyes and leaned into Yehuda's chest. "There is no other bridge . . . not for hundreds of kilometers in either direction. Either we cross that bridge now, or we go home. Again."

The faces of his children passed through Yehuda's mind as he envisioned trying to cross the savagely swaying Prieglius River Bridge. Once more its planks arose, awash with tree limbs and bubbling brown water. "We can try."

His father rested his head against Yehuda's shoulder. "Thank you, my son. We . . ."

The bridge was lifted high once more by an onrushing wave of floodwater. The massive braces of the bridge bent toward the gorge, their thick support ropes screeching as they pulled against the wood. In an instant, like a sail driven by gale force winds, the middle third of the bridge blasted down the gorge on the back of the raging water. Carried by the flood, the Prieglius River Bridge disappeared into the darkness.

Three hundred meters above the river, Yehuda felt his father's body sag against his chest. He grabbed the Gaon under the arms to keep him from falling.

"Itzak, help me. We need to get my father to shelter."

With Itzak's assistance, Yehuda lifted the Gaon onto the mule. As he considered how to secure his father in place, the Gaon opened his eyes. His voice was shallow, but clear.

"Take me to the house of Abraham Rosenberg, rabbi in Konigsberg. He is the son of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin."

"Your most loyal and learned pupil," said Itzak.

"Yes." The Gaon nodded. "And a man we can trust. One of the few."



On the mantle, the clock was just short of midnight. Outside, the storm raged unabated, as wild and clamoring as two hours ago when they first had reached

the Konigsberg Synagogue and the home of Rabbi Rosenberg, hard against the synagogue's western wall. Changed into dry clothes and fed a hearty soup, a thick mug of hot tea warming his hands and a welcoming fire heating his body, the Vilna Gaon was thankful to God for saving their lives once again and for bringing them—exhausted and despondent—to the home of this good man.

Yet his heart was heavy with failing to fulfill his vow . . . to bring his prophecies to the leaders of Jerusalem. No, not his prophecies. Never his prophecies. He was just an instrument. The prophecies came from the heart of God. His job was to deliver them. Again, he had failed.

"You didn't fail, Rebbe."

Rabbi Abraham Rosenberg rested in a chair facing Rabbi Zalman, his left side toward the crackling fire that faced the Gaon. His eyes reflected the comfort of his words.

"No man was going to pass through the Prieglius River Gorge tonight," said Rabbi Rosenberg. "From what Yehuda tells me, you have been spared death many times on this journey. Yet the demons of hell continue to come against you. Praise his holy name, the Lord of Hosts has brought you safely to my home. I do not think it coincidence."

Leaning forward in his chair, Rabbi Rosenberg closed the distance to the Gaon to just more than an arm's length. "Tell me, honored one, how may I be of assistance?"

They were alone, Yehuda and Itzak retired for the night. Doubt assailed the Gaon's mind as he considered the impact of his coming request. But he set his heart upon the Lord, closed his eyes, and recited the Shema.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

After the first two words, Rabbi Rosenberg joined in the traditional opening to Jewish prayer.

The Gaon raised his head, looked into the fire, and then turned to his host.

"Other than my sons, your father is probably the one man nearest to my heart," he said. "No disrespect to you, Rebbe, but if he were closer, it would be his home in which I would be resting. Because what I have to share with you tonight is from the throne of God himself. Its importance transcends the ages, and its meaning shakes me to my soul."

Reaching to his neck, the Gaon lifted a stout leather cord from his shoulders

and pulled from under his robes a leather pouch that was attached to the cord. He fixed his attention on the rabbi, the pouch held between them.

“As my son will attest, I sleep only two hours in a day,” said the Gaon, “never more than thirty minutes at a time. My hours are filled, and my stamina supplied, by studying the words of the Torah. Just over one year ago, with Yehuda in the room, I slept for seven hours straight. During that time, my spirit was lifted into a different realm, a place of living light and exquisite peace. That place was not of this earth.”

Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman looked over his shoulder to make sure the door to the room was securely closed. “I received two prophetic messages that day, both of which are written on parchment in this pouch. This journey—the last, I fear, of three attempts—was intended to take these prophecies to the Rishon LeZion, the chief rabbi in Jerusalem, and allow them to be safeguarded there. The messages in these prophecies must be protected and preserved until the day comes when they are needed.”

“You honor me, and frighten me, at the same time, Master,” said Rosenberg. “What should I ask first—what is in these messages, or why are you sharing this information with me?”

His long, thick white beard bobbing on his chest, the Gaon nodded his head and looked at Rabbi Rosenberg from under his eyelids, like a teacher pleased with his pupil. “Well spoken, my young friend. First, I will tell you what. Then I will tell you why. And then you will have a fateful decision to make.”

Rabbi Elijah reached into the pouch and withdrew two pieces of parchment, each one folded over. He allowed the pouch to fall back upon his chest as he held the two pieces of parchment before him in his right hand.

“On that day, the first words the Voice of the Light said to me were, *‘Son of man, listen to my words and write them down for the days to come. When you hear that the Russians have captured the city of Crimea, you should know that the Times of Messiah have started, that his steps are being heard.*

And when you hear that the Russians have reached the city of Constantinople, you should put on your Shabbat clothes and not take them off, because it means that Messiah is about to come at any minute.’”

The Gaon watched Rabbi Rosenberg closely. First, Rosenberg’s eyes widened in wonder. Then he sat back, the first of many questions flashing across his

countenance. He stirred, raised his hand to speak, but held his tongue. A sigh lifted his shoulders, then appeared to be released from every part of his body. He shook his head, and the Gaon felt a twinge of fear and despair.

“Rav,” Rosenberg said, expressing respect for the great rabbi, “my mind is spinning in a torrent that my words cannot yet express.” Rosenberg spread his hands. “No man knows the hour of Messiah’s appearance. Many have issued unfounded predictions and been proven fools. But you . . . many revere your knowledge and your wisdom. Master.” He leaned toward the Gaon. “Are you certain?”

A jab of indignation stabbed at the Gaon’s heart. “That I heard a word from the Lord? That the light which spoke to me was heavenly? Was Isaiah certain . . . Jeremiah . . . Ezekiel? I think, not certain. But confident? Yes, I am confident that I was called into the throne room of the Lord and that these words were from the Holy One.”

“Forgive me, Master, but I . . .”

“No!” The Gaon held up his left hand. “Judge me . . . not yet. There are two pieces of parchment, no?” He separated the two sheets, holding one in each hand. “It is the second one”—he motioned with his right hand—“that gives me confidence in the providence of each one. But first . . .” He placed the pieces of parchment back in the leather pouch and pushed himself more erect in his chair. “Let me tell you why I am sharing these secrets with you tonight. Tomorrow, Yehuda, Itzak, and I will begin our return journey to Vilna. No more will I attempt to reach Jerusalem. Clearly it is not yet God’s timing for these prophecies to reach that city. So when we depart, I *will* leave something behind.”

His host pulled his hands back into the folds of his robe as if he were terrified at the thought of what the Gaon might ask him to accept.

“You are wise to be cautious,” said the Gaon. “There is a covenant anointing on these prophecies, the same heavenly power of God that filled and flowed forth from the mercy seat of the ark. The vengeance of God will fall upon any who touch these prophecies without first receiving the anointing of God.

“If you agree to my request, Abraham, first you need to be blessed and protected by the anointing of God. And before passing this prophecy on to another, you must cover and protect him with that same anointing—the Aaronic blessing—or the angel of death will come through your door.”

Rabbi Rosenberg's chest heaved under the weight of the deep breaths that preceded each sigh that sprang from his lips. He was looking at the floor, avoiding the Gaon's eyes.

"Abraham," the Gaon whispered, "are you willing to help me carry this responsibility?"

An old wooden clock in the corner clicked away the seconds. With one last deep breath, Rabbi Rosenberg squared his shoulders and sat back in his chair. "Yes."

"Then for your own protection, Abraham, recite with me now the Aaronic blessing. Give me your hands."

Rabbi Rosenberg's hands trembled, but his grasp was firm.

"God of heaven, God of our fathers, I place my brother Abraham into your care as I bestow upon him the task of guardian for some of the words you spoke to me. Defend him as you have defended me. Protect him with this anointing as you continue to protect me, as long as these prophecies are in our possession. May we both remain under the shelter of your anointing. Now, join with me, Abraham."

Rosenberg joined in as the Gaon recited the blessing. "The Lord bless you, and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace."

The Gaon, eyes closed and head bowed, held onto Rabbi Rosenberg's hands a few moments before releasing them. Opening his eyes, he reached for the pouch and once again withdrew the two pieces of parchment. He looked at them, separated them one into each hand, then turned his gaze upon the rabbi.

"My son, the Lord of Israel is One, but he is also Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end—is he not? All things are in balance, which is one of the first laws of kabbalah. Beginning and end. This first prophecy"—the Gaon held up the sheet in his left hand—"any man can create words like these out of his own mind. But this"—he took the parchment in his right hand and placed it on Rosenberg's knee—"this is proof that the words are not mine."

Rabbi Rosenberg looked down at the folded sheet on his knee but did not move to touch it. "What is written on this document of yours?"

Ah, does he now begin to believe?

"The document is no longer mine if you accept it. It is yours. I leave it in

your safe keeping,” said the Gaon. He placed his hand on Rosenberg’s arm to stifle his objection.

“My son, I am convinced these two prophecies cannot remain together. I am now assured it is the power of the words on these sheets that draws demonic opposition. Keeping them together, none of us will be safe. I will keep the first prophecy with me. If you accept, the second will stay here with you. Hide it well. Once we return to Vilna, I will dispatch Yehuda and his entire family to move to Königsberg. He will become your yeshiva master and teach your scholars. I charge you that, between the two of you, one of your descendants will be chief rabbi of Königsberg for all years to come. When the day is right, you or your seed must reveal this prophecy—without fail.”

Rabbi Rosenberg was shaking his head. His hands came out of his lap and grasped tightly to the folds in his robes just below his neck. He began to rock back and forth in his chair as if reciting a prayer. The Gaon’s heart sank.

“What, Master, is written on this second document?”

The Gaon picked up the piece of parchment from Rosenberg’s knee and held it out to his host. “It is a warning to our brothers in Palestine. To Jews the world over. And it also reveals the identity of the great deceiver, the man of violence. The one who is sent from hell to overcome Messiah, if that were possible. Here . . . open it.”

Rabbi Rosenberg’s rocking continued. Now his lips were moving frantically. The Gaon kept his arm outstretched. Rosenberg pulled in a deep breath and took the parchment from the Gaon’s grasp.

“Praise the holy one of Israel,” said the Gaon. “Now it is under your care.”

As if he were opening a cage of vipers, the rabbi pried apart the paper and looked at the writing on the surface. His head tilted to the side and a grimace creased his cheeks. “I can’t read this. What does it say?”

A great burden was already partially lifting from the Gaon’s shoulders, a relief that would allow him some measure of peace. He smiled for the first time in weeks. “You are not meant to know, my friend. The words on these pieces of parchment have one purpose—to warn and prepare the people of Israel on the day determined by God for their revealing. Until that time, these prophecies are to be hidden and protected. There are forces in this world and the next that are diabolically opposed to the revelation of these prophecies. We must keep them safe.

“One way to keep them safe,” said the Gaon, “was for me to transcribe them into a code that would be inscrutable to most people on this earth, a code that none but a Talmudic scholar can understand, only the Rishon LeZion in Jerusalem.”

“The second way, I see now, is to keep them separate from each other, hidden by time and protected by distance until the determined day for each is reached.”

Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman rose from his chair and placed his hand on Rabbi Rosenberg’s shoulder. “When the day comes, Abraham—and that day will be when this first prophecy is revealed—you or your seed *must* immediately take this second prophecy to the chief rabbi in Jerusalem. If this second prophecy is not revealed in its right time, not only is it likely that all Jews will be enslaved or murdered, but the eternal destiny of all men will also hang in the balance.”

Rabbi Rosenberg’s eyes had grown wide during the Gaon’s instructions. “Rabbi . . . you make me fear for my children’s children, that judgment day may soon be upon us.”

“I know not of when comes judgment day,” said the Gaon, his voice soft and reassuring. “Only that God has a purpose for the words on these pieces of parchment. But believe me, Abraham, I may have failed to reach Jerusalem, but I will not fail in this. We will guard these prophecies. We will hold them sacred and secret. And in that day when it is decreed from heaven, we must reveal these prophecies. If we do not, this world, and all those who live in it, will be doomed.”

A log snapped and fell into the fire, sending a shower of sparks onto the hearth. The Gaon gave Rabbi Rosenberg’s shoulder a squeeze. “Take heart, Abraham. Our God is with us. Let us pray for our success and your safety. Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God; the Lord is One. Now, we need a secret place that is safe.”



Can a person think they are dead?

Death flashed across the Vilna Gaon’s mind as a supernatural light burrowed through his closed eyelids. *I’m in heaven?*

When he opened his eyes, he knew he was dead.

The tongues of fire in the hearth were silenced. Candles on the mantelpiece flickered and were extinguished. But the light in the main room of Rabbi Rosenberg's home only grew in intensity, warming the room in spite of the extinguished fire.

Before the Vilna Gaon stood three men. They were tall and regal, cascading brown hair falling well past their shoulders. They were dressed like ancient warriors, gleaming silver breastplates covering their chests, massive broad swords in scabbards hanging from their hips. Their wings were one-third again taller than their bodies, furled tightly behind their shoulders.

Yes, I am dead. But . . . how do I know this?

The angel in the middle pointed to the left, to the door through which the Gaon connected his last concrete memory—Rabbi Rosenberg exiting on the way to his toolshed. *Was that seconds ago? Was I asleep? Am I dead?*

"Delay him," said the angel in the middle.

The angel on the left moved toward the door like fog drifting over snow, reached out, and placed his left hand against it.

Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman—honored Talmudic scholar—returned his gaze to the angel in the middle.

The angel nodded his head toward the rabbi. "I am Bayard. We have been with you since you left Vilna. Your servant, Itzak, has sharp eyes. But it was our sharp swords that rescued you from the hooded assassins who sought your life in the forest."

"And I am not dead," said the Gaon, as much to himself as to these apparitions who looked so much like flesh-and-blood warriors. If he were not dreaming or hallucinating, then these were angels standing in Rabbi Rosenberg's home. The Gaon bowed his head in respect. "I am grateful for your protection," he said, "but why are you here . . . now?"

Bayard rested his right hand on the hilt of his sword. "We are here to help you complete your mission."

He raised his head to meet the gaze of Bayard. "I have failed. My mission has failed. Three times I have endeavored to reach Jerusalem and deliver the prophetic messages to the chief rabbi." His hand felt for the leather pouch that was concealed under his robes.

He waited.

Bayard crossed sharply muscled arms over his shining breastplate. "Evil has

opposed you,” he said, “but evil has not triumphed. Your mission is neither a failure nor complete.”

Bayard unfolded his arms and took a step toward the Gaon. “The words you received during your vision of the living light,” said Bayard, “they have power. You were warned about that power, the need to protect it and the need to protect yourself from it with the blessing of Aaron. Nothing you received from the living light has changed, can change.”

A year earlier, when the Vilna Gaon had spent seven sleeping hours in a different realm, his spirit had lifted into that place of living light and exquisite peace. During that vision, the Gaon was aware of other holy, immortal ones—other angels—warriors like Bayard. The warriors who were engaged in a supernatural battle.

“The messages themselves have power to change the course of history,” said Bayard, “power to rescue your chosen people from those sworn to your destruction . . . those who stand against the purposes of God.”

“The evil agents of the Great Deceiver also have power,” said the Gaon. “The same power that is above the order of human nature and resides in immortal beings like yourself. It will take the power of the holy immortal ones to thwart the power of the fallen immortal ones.”

The intensity of Bayard’s scrutiny created tiny fissures of doubt in the Gaon’s resolve. Had he overstepped?

“What you ask is rarely given,” said Bayard. “You are requesting to bring immortal power into the mortal world.”

The Gaon measured his words carefully. “It appears to me that it may not be God’s timing for these prophecies to be delivered. That their day has not yet come. But it also appears to me that, when they are together, these prophecies have attracted the wrath of hell. It was my thought to keep the first prophecy with me and pass it down to my sons until the day it is to be revealed. The second I intended to leave here with Rabbi Rosenberg.

“So I ask again. Why are you here?”

“We are here to serve,” said Bayard.

“I believe you are here to help,” responded the Gaon.

Bayard smiled, and pulsing waves of light surrounded his head. The Gaon felt as if his cheek had been kissed. “Yes,” he nodded, “and it is help we bring.”

Bayard turned his head and the angel on his right stepped to his side.

"You are correct," said Bayard. "These prophecies must no longer stay together. They must be preserved and protected until their time comes. While there is divine power in the messages, the prophecies themselves do not possess the power to hold back and deny the intentions of the immortal evil ones. You will need immortal power to combat immortal enemies . . . the power of kabbalah and the power of heaven, lethal power protecting the words themselves."

Bayard lifted his right hand from the hilt of his sword and held it out to the angel on his right. From within the folds of his cape, the angel withdrew a small metal box. It looked like bronze. He handed the box to Bayard, who moved it to his left hand.

"Stand."

The Gaon pushed the robe off his lap and wrestled his legs into a standing position. The angel reached out his right hand.

"Take my hand."

With a sharp intake of breath, the Gaon placed his left hand into Bayard's palm.

"This is the box of power," said Bayard. "It is anointed from the throne room of heaven. No evil shall stand against it. And no mortal being may touch it and live." The Gaon felt a shiver in his bones, and it was not because of his age. "Except those under the blessing. The same blessing that protects the guardian from the lethal nature of the message will protect the guardian from the lethal nature of the box. But know this . . . the box has a mission of its own. Do not deny the box from its intended purpose."

Bayard's hand gently pulled the Gaon closer to him. The angel released the Gaon's hand and placed his hand on the Gaon's head. "The guardian of the box may only touch it under the anointing of the blessing. And there can be, at any one time, only one guardian. This blessing must be given intentionally, one guardian to the next, until the time of the prophecies is revealed. If any mortal touches this box without the anointing of the blessing, they will die a hideous death."

Bayard looked deeply into the Gaon's heart. "Do you still want this power?"

The Gaon nodded his head. His voice, when he found it, was a whisper. "We need it. All the guardians will need it."

"Very well, then."

A gasp leaped from the Gaon's mouth as Bayard unfurled his wings. The wings encircled the Gaon as the angel pressed closer.

"The Lord bless you, and keep you," said Bayard, his words a chant of power as they recited the biblical Aaronic blessing. "The Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace."

The Gaon could actually feel it . . . years of decline purified from his bones; richness infusing through his veins; strength filling his muscles. He realized his eyes were closed. When he opened them, Bayard stood before him, the box of power held outstretched, in both hands.

"Take it," said Bayard, "and hammer a warning into its lid using the symbols of kabbalah . . . the Merkabah in the middle; two mezuzahs in the corners opposite each other; the Hamsa in one corner, the Tree of Life in the other. To touch this box, or the message that rests within it, is to sever the tree of life."

A question flooded into the Gaon's mind, sparking anxiety. "Will our enemies have the ability to decipher the warning . . . perhaps avoid the power of the box?"

Bayard stretched out his arms and held the box closer to the Gaon. "The weapons that we fight with are not mortal. And not everything that is immortal is visible to the enemy. Take this box and place the second prophecy inside it. Leave it here. Each has an appointed time. We will protect you and the first prophecy. The box of power will protect the second. And the plans of God will not be denied."



It was well after midnight, and the Gaon's frail body was aching for rest. He was startled out of his slumber when Rabbi Rosenberg returned to the main room with the tools he had retrieved from the shed adjacent to his home.

"Oh, you were asleep?" said Rosenberg. "Forgive me, it took me much longer than I expected to find the tools."

Rosenberg looked at the Gaon's hands, resting in his lap. "That is a fine metal box," he said. "Did you bring it with you?"

The Gaon's gaze moved from Rosenberg, past the fire in the hearth, to the bronze box in his hands. "It was a gift," said the Gaon. "Do you have a hammer and an awl in your tool box?"

Rosenberg took a small hammer and an awl and laid them on the table next to the Gaon's chair. Selecting a maul and chisel, he started digging into the mortar around the stones in the bottom left corner of his hearth.

Reciting incantations cherished by Jewish kabbalah mystics for centuries, the Gaon opened the bronze box, rubbed his fingers over the underside of the lid and gently began working the metal with the awl and hammer. He hammered five cryptic symbols into its lid. Working in from the bottom side of the lid, the symbols projected from the top in three dimensions. One symbol, in the center of the lid, looked like a three-dimensional Star of David.

His work completed, the Gaon took the parchment given to Rosenberg, wrapped it in linen and leather, placed it inside the box, and sealed it with wax on all four sides, the Gaon's seal pressed into the wax. Rosenberg had removed three large stones from low on the left corner of the hearth. The Gaon leaned on Rosenberg's arm as he lifted his aching body from the chair and moved to the corner of the hearth. Both of them reciting the Aaronic blessing, the Gaon took the box, turned it on its edge, and squeezed it into the opening. Rabbi Rosenberg replaced the stones and then mixed some mortar with dirt and pressed it into the openings between the stones. A casual observer would never notice the difference.



As the sun rose the next morning, the Gaon of Vilna and his party mounted their mules and set off for Lithuania. Twisting awkwardly in his saddle, the Gaon cast a glance back to Rosenberg who stood silently in the doorway to his house. He breathed a sigh of relief. Now only one remained his responsibility. But the box, and the prophecy, would never be far from the mind of the rabbis of Konigsberg.



Konigsberg, Germany

November 8, 1938

Relentless, like a dagger carved from a glacier, the wind made a mockery of Dr. Hugo Falkenheim's thin wool coat. It was a fashionable coat, well befitting the owner of the Konigsberg Pediatric Clinic, but poorly suited to the bitter blasts that ricocheted off the buildings on Synagogenstrasse. Holding down his hat,

Falkenheim bruised his knuckles knocking feverishly on the heavy wooden door of the stone building adjacent to the Old Synagogue.

Driven more by urgency than the bone-rattling wind, Dr. Falkenheim pushed through the door, and its attendant, as soon as it opened a crack. "Forgive me, I must see the rabbi immediately." Chairman of the Jewish Congregation of Königsberg for the last ten years, Hugo Falkenheim often visited with Rabbi Lewin. Seldom had he arrived uninvited—never demanding an audience. But today was different.

Rapping once on the door to the rabbi's office, Falkenheim burst in without waiting for a response, taking off his hat and shoving the door closed in his wake as a warning erupted from his lips.

"They are coming, Reinhold—tonight or tomorrow," said Falkenheim, gasping for breath. "They are coming and they will burn the synagogues, all of them. We must get the box to safety. We may have waited too long, but it can't remain in Prussia any longer."

Reinhold Lewin, chief rabbi of the city's Old Synagogue, turned in his chair to face Falkenheim, a look of doubt replaced by resignation. "Yours has always been a voice of reason, Hugo." The rabbi got up and walked to the small window that faced the street. "You believe," he said, turning back to the room, "the Nazis would do such a thing? Burn all the synagogues? It sounds barbaric—and insane."

He had been loath to believe the report himself. But Falkenheim knew its source was impeccable. His bald head steaming in the warm room, he stepped alongside the rabbi and gripped his arm. "It is barbaric and it is insane, Reinhold. That is true. But it is also true that Hitler is fomenting a hatred of Jews that will only end in a pogrom, or worse. The Brown Shirts are coming. I know this for a fact. And they will destroy and burn not just the synagogues, but everything that is Jewish in Königsberg."

Falkenheim locked his eyes on the rabbi's. "But not only Königsberg, Reinhold. This atrocity will occur across all the land that is under the swastika's shadow, all on the same night. We Jews are no longer safe here. And neither is that document. We must get it to safety."

The rabbi bit his lip. He looked unconvinced. "And what do you propose?"

"I leave within the hour," said Falkenheim, hoping his words would persuade the rabbi to action. "I will drive to Warsaw and then take the train to

Istanbul. I have friends there. It is a strong, safe, and stable Jewish community. I know a place where the Gaon's message will be secure until . . ."

"Until the day it is needed. Yes, I know." Rabbi Lewin stepped away from the window, and away from Falkenheim, pacing across the small room he used as an office. "Five generations have closely held the Gaon's secret. Five generations, father to son, entrusted with its safety here in Konigsberg. Since I have no son, the responsibility became yours and mine. But . . . perhaps this Hitler is the man of violence that legend tells us is in the prophecy." He turned to face Falkenheim. "How are we to know?"

"Because the Gaon's first prophecy is yet to be fulfilled," said Falkenheim, his voice low but urgency in his words. "This is not the time for the prophecy to be revealed. But it is time for us to act, to protect the Gaon's message."

Lewin stepped toward Falkenheim and placed his hands on both shoulders. *"May Adonai bless you and keep you; may Adonai make his face to shine on you and show you his favor; may Adonai lift up his face toward you and give you peace."*



Twenty minutes later, Falkenheim stood at the door to Rabbi Lewin's office, a calfskin bag in his left hand.

"Thank you, Reinhold. Thank you for your courage."

Rabbi Lewin shrugged his shoulders, his hands held palms up. "Eh, I should be the one thanking you," he said. "For being a man of wisdom . . . and action. Be careful, my friend."

Falkenheim rested his right hand on the rabbi's arm. "I'll be back, my rabbi. We must convince our people to escape this place, before it is too late for all of us."

Lewin nodded his head then lowered his chin. "Hear O Israel . . ."

Fairfax, Virginia
April 21, 2014, 4:13 p.m.

Joy flooded Brian Mullaney's soul. Released for a moment from the bondage of his memories and regrets, he basked in joy's glorious freedom. So sweet. So rare.

"Are you here?"

Mullaney opened his eyes and glanced to his right where his brother, Doak, sat in one of the folding canvas chairs that are the ubiquitous havens for moms and dads at youth sports events across the country.

His hat pulled down and his jacket collar up around his ears, Doak Mullaney nodded his head toward the soccer field just below them. "I thought you liked this game."

Brian turned his attention back to the soccer field where his girls were competing for their school, a smile curling the corners of his mouth and warming the outer reaches of his heart. "No . . . I love this game."

"So stop snoozing. You might miss Kylie score a goal."

"Not snoozing, little brother. Just happy."

"Well, that's about time."

Keeping his eyes on the tangle of ponytails racing up and down the soccer field, Mullaney reached out and touched his brother's arm. "I know . . . I'll take it."

The pine trees behind them captured some of the wind blowing through Lawrence Park. At six foot two and 225 pounds, Mullaney had the build of a football player. He wrapped his arms across his chest, pulling his wool coat closer, as much to keep the warmth in his heart as it was to keep the cold from his bones.

"I remember when they first started to play," said Mullaney, "running around in a pack, all of them trying to kick the ball at the same time. The very serious looks on their faces as they tried to remember what their coaches told them. Then to see the growth, the maturing of their skills. The best part . . ." Mullaney inclined his head and shot a quick glance at his brother before

returning his attention to the game. “The best part is watching them run—free and wild, abandoned to the speed and the thrill of the game. I sit here and watch them, and all the cares of the world lift off my shoulders. I’m free with them . . . uninhibited, running with them . . . the joy of being so full of life and oblivious to what’s out there beyond the park. It’s glorious.”

“Sounds like a religious experience,” said Doak.

“You’re almost right. You know—Yes! Great shot!” Mullaney was up out of his chair, his arms and fists raised above his head, so much a Rocky pose. “Way to go, Kylie!” he shouted across the field. “Way to go!”

“She hates that, you know.”

“All kids hate that, Doak,” said Mullaney, easing back into the chair. “And all kids love it and would wither away if they didn’t get it. It’s affirmation. We all need affirmation, right?”

“Well, I never—”

“Look at them, will you.” Mullaney pointed to the joyous scrum at the end of the field, hugging and jumping together, smiles as broad as the Potomac. “They love being part of a team. There is something about women and girls on a team that men just don’t share. Did you ever watch the women volleyball players in the Olympics?”

“Yeah, they—”

“They congratulate each other after every point—whether they won or lost the point. Get together for a group hug and encouragement. I think it’s because they just love playing a game together. Sure, they want to win. Kylie and Samantha are fierce competitors, both desperate to make the playoffs. But they are also fierce teammates. And they love their team. I only felt that once. I helped coach a Little League Baseball team when I was in college . . . you remember, Phelps Insurance. Our kids were terrible the first year—really bad. Then they became competitive the second year. But the third year . . . all the kids still together on the same team . . . the third year we went undefeated.”

The score of the soccer game was still only 1–0 for Lawrence School, but the opposing Draper Park Falcons had an awesome front line, so Mullaney never took his eyes off his girls in the Lawrence green and white, wishing them on to another goal.

“Undefeated. That is hard to do in any sport, at any level,” he said. “You’ve

got to be really good, and you've got to be lucky too. I'll never forget those last few games. They were so intense and emotional. The head coach lost it one day and threw a baseball soaring over the opposing stands. Got ejected. Nearly got kicked out of the league. The kids were stunned . . . shocked. Then they laughed. They were having too much fun to let anything get in their way. Those kids loved each other for what they accomplished."

Mullaney pointed toward the soccer field. "But that was nothing compared to what these girls experience. For them, team is life. It's all about relationships. In a lot of ways, the game is only the vehicle to the relationships."

"Until you get one game from the playoffs."

"Okay . . . okay, that's true. They love the game and they are driven to win. But it's all based on their relationship together. I just love watching them. And at some level, I envy them for something I didn't have—we didn't have. Not with Dad. Not with other guys outside the service. That emotional commitment, that heartfelt camaraderie." The words tumbled out of Mullaney without conscious thought. "Guys don't go that deep. It's the task, the game, the score. It's not so much about the other people. That's why I'm so grateful, so fortunate, to have Abby. She's the only one . . ." As the significance of what he was saying fell from his lips to his heart, Mullaney's thoughts left the field and looked inward. His last words were whispered, as if directed to himself. "And I'd be lost without her."

The first half came to an end, and the girls huddled with their coaches on either side of the field.

Mullaney held up a thermos toward Doak. "Coffee?"

"No thanks." Mullaney's brother held his gaze. "You mentioned Dad. How are you with that?"

Brian Mullaney focused on the thermos. Nothing was going to ruin this day. The coffee was still hot, and the cup warmed his hand as he filled it. *Stay in the moment*. But that was so difficult when the past hit you with the bite of April wind.

"Which part—the part that he just died a week ago, or the part that he got lost in his mind for the last ten years, or the part where he never forgave me for leaving the force?"

"Yeah, that part," said Doak.

Mullaney sipped his coffee, looking at the empty field and feeling as empty

inside. *Yeah, that part.* John Mullaney, 1946–2014, Captain, Virginia State Police (Ret.). Left this earth in 2004 and never came back. Betrayed by his eldest son in 1995. Held onto his bitterness like it was a life preserver. And that's probably what ended up killing him. Unforgiveness. And it was Mullaney's fault. *Yeah, that part.*

"You know, Doak . . . sometimes you just need to grab hold of your own life and come to a decision about where you're headed. Abby and I prayed long and hard to know God's will about that choice. It wasn't easy to go against tradition, go against Dad's wishes. But we were certain it was God's plan for me to join the State Department. It's a shame Dad could never understand or accept that decision."

The girls were running back on the field for the second half when Mullaney turned to his brother. "You know, it's ironic. Or too sad to comprehend. You remember Dad's favorite phrase when he was miffed?"

"Don't be useless! Get up and do something!" said Doak. "Yeah, how could either of us ever forget?"

Mullaney watched as the game progressed and his Lawrence School Crusaders increased their lead. But the joy was gone.

"Sad that he ended up the way he did, curled up in a fetal ball on a nursing home bed. I remember whispering in his ear that last day. 'God loves you, Dad. And so do I.' But he wasn't there. He hadn't been *there* for ten years. It would have killed him to know how it ended for him. Probably better . . ."

"Yeah, probably better," said Doak. "Listen, I've got to report in. This one looks like it's in the bag. Give Abby and the girls a hug for me and tell them I'll do everything I can to be at the playoff game." He stood up, stretching in his gray-and-black Virginia State Police uniform.

Mullaney felt a stab of remorse. "That bar looks good on you, Lieutenant."

"Thanks," said Doak. "Now if they would only get rid of these Smokey the Bear hats, I'd be fine." He laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Be careful out there, Brian."

Mullaney added his hand over his brother's. "Be careful out there, Doak."

Mullaney watched his brother walk up the hill toward his squad car. And he missed the Crusader's last goal.



Washington, DC
April 23, 6:06 p.m.

Down the hall was his regular office. But it was empty tonight. Diplomatic Security Service agent Brian Mullaney was on a different assignment, picking up a shift in the operations center because he lost a bet. Georgetown going down to defeat in the first round of the Big East basketball tournament would do that.

In the home stretch of his forty-fourth year, Mullaney was naturally calm in demeanor, fluid and graceful in his movement, with ever watchful, knowing eyes. Doing this job he often felt older than his years. The laugh lines at the corners of his eyes told one story, but the wisps of gray at the temples of his thick, black hair gave a more accurate statement. Walking into ops, he knew he was early. His shift as diplomatic security watch liaison officer didn't officially start until six thirty. But it had been awhile since he was on duty in ops. Mullaney wanted to make sure he was up to speed.

The US State Department operations center—ops to everyone in the business—was a monitoring and information hub that essentially kept track of everything important that was happening in the world twenty-four seven. On the seventh floor of the Harry S. Truman building on C Street in the District of Columbia, ops was just down the hall—and past several armed guards—from the secretary of state's suite and the offices occupied by State's upper echelons of leadership. That is where Brian Mullaney belonged.

A nineteen-year veteran of the Diplomatic Security Service, Mullaney was adjutant to George Morningstar, the deputy assistant secretary for diplomatic security. Morningstar was a bigwig, two steps removed from the secretary of state himself, but a regular guy. Mullaney was blessed by the trust he and Morningstar shared. But tonight the lights in his office were dark, and Mullaney found himself in the middle of one of the most critical links in the chain of his nation's security.

In many ways, DSS fulfilled a similar mission to that of the US Secret Service—protecting American ambassadors and consular staff overseas, in nations around the world. But DSS also set up task forces to provide security for things like the opening sessions of the UN General Assembly each fall in New York City, or for the Olympics and World Cup every four years. It also supervised security for the foreign diplomatic corps when those officials

were on US soil. Lately, DSS had been deeply involved with international law-enforcement activities, hunting human traffickers and drug lords.

But it was overseas where DSS made its bones, protecting the thirteen thousand men and women of the US Foreign Service on assignment in other countries. Overseas was also where DSS agents were most at risk.

And ops was at the center of that mission. Teams of sixty-five—including forty-five watch officers—rotated on eight-hour shifts to effectively manage the two hundred and forty-four telephone lines that handled three hundred forty thousand annual calls to ops. Live video feeds from nearly every US embassy and consular station in the world fed into a wall of television monitors, and ops staff members were required to maintain active, open lines of communication not only with the secretary of state, but also with nearly every level of the executive branch of government.

Mullaney wasn't responsible for directing the activity of this sixty-five-person cohort. His job was to make split-second decisions in cases where American lives or property were at risk, to get those decisions right, and to communicate those decisions immediately and accurately to State's top-echelon leadership.

Mullaney walked along the back of ops, past the gray cubicles with signs hanging from the ceiling announcing each person's title, toward the watch commander's desk. The further Mullaney stepped into ops, the sharper his focus became, and the more precise his thoughts. Just in case. Over the last fifty years, six United States ambassadors on foreign duty had been murdered by armed attackers. Every year over a dozen American overseas installations were attacked in one way or another. Crises didn't happen every day . . . but sometimes it felt that way.



"I've got a report of an explosion at the compound in Ankara!" came a shout from one of the gray cubicles that spread out over the main floor of ops.

Mullaney bolted upright. Voices, adrenaline, and action all accelerated.

To his left, Senior Watch Officer Gwen DeBerry pointed to her deputy. "Locate the secretary, but hold off on the call for a moment." She turned to the ops floor. "Pull it up on the monitors," she called to the watch officer controlling the video feed. Mullaney scanned the wall as a number of screens faded

and then refocused with views of the US consulate in Ankara, Turkey, from several different angles.

The main gate of the embassy was a tangle of concrete chunks and twisted steel. Hooded men in the street were firing what looked like rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons at the embassy's defenders. Bodies lay on the ground on both sides of the gate.

"Make the call," DeBerry said over her shoulder. "Heavily armed attackers at the main gate in Ankara. More to come."

Mullaney was at DeBerry's side in two strides. "Who's that on our side—marines or Turks?"

DeBerry shook her head and broke away from the feed to face Mullaney. "Turkish contracted agents, I believe. I haven't seen any marines yet. Probably getting the embassy staff to safety. But my biggest concern"—she looked up as another blast assaulted the embassy gate—"is that we don't know where the ambassador is. He had a meeting scheduled in the city this morning. We were not yet alerted about what time he planned to leave. So he may be on the streets or in-house. We don't know yet. And Tommy is there too."

Mullaney turned his attention back to DeBerry at the mention of his best friend's name. Tommy Hernandez and Mullaney went through DSS training at Quantico together and remained close even as their placements took them to far-flung outposts worldwide.

"I've got the incident process checklist started," said DeBerry.

No time . . . stay focused . . .

"Can you check to ensure the comm protocol is instituted?"

"Sure . . ." Mullaney looked at the screens and the firefight lighting up the dimness of early dawn at the embassy's main gate. "I'll be right back."



With half a dozen long strides, Mullaney entered the soundproof communications room at the rear of ops where the voice, video, and data recorders were kept and monitored twenty-four seven. Stuffing his anxiety for the moment, Mullaney raced through the communications protocol with the watch officer on duty. "Okay, looks good." He turned to give the watch officer a thumbs-up, but the agent was on a secure phone that he now shoved in Mullaney's direction.

"It's the ambassador."

In a heartbeat Mullaney was across the floor. "Mr. Ambassador? Brian Mullaney. DSS . . . Are you safe, sir?"

US Embassy, Ankara, Turkey

April 24, 6:17 a.m.

"We're good at the moment, Mullaney," said Joseph Atticus Cleveland, US ambassador to Turkey. Cleveland swept a quick glance around the underground bunker filled with frightened embassy staff and edgy, armed marines. "All the embassy staff members are secured in safe havens with marines on guard. Sounds like a terrible fight going on out there. Who's winning?"

"Hard to say at this moment, sir, but the bad guys have yet to gain entry to the compound. Things are pretty brutal around the main gate right now. We've got local reinforcements on the way."

"Mullaney? You're George Morningstar's adjutant, right? Hold a moment . . ."

Cleveland inclined his ear toward the chief of his DSS security detail. Underground and as secure as they were, the reverberating sounds of explosions still shattered the silence in the bunker. "Okay . . . Listen, Mullaney, I'm informed you are a man we can rely on."

"Thank you, sir."

"So Tommy wants you to know that you still owe him twenty bucks on the Final Four."

Ops Center, Washington, DC

April 23, 11:18 p.m.

Mullaney laughed to himself. The scuttlebutt on Ambassador Cleveland was simple; he was a solid, stand-up guy who was very rarely shaken. "Yes, sir. Tell Tommy to keep his mind on your game. The money will be waiting when he gets home."

There was some muted conversation on the other end of the line. "Okay," Mullaney could barely hear Cleveland's voice. "Give me some space for a moment . . . Mullaney, you there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where's the secretary?"

"Geneva, sir. Deputy Secretary Roberts is in California, but Deputy Secretary Webster is on his way."

"Okay, but somebody needs to hear this . . . just in case," said Cleveland. "Our plans changed here this morning. Original plan was to head into the city to meet with the Turkish president. That got switched in the early hours of this morning. President Kashani was coming here."

"Sir?"

"An agent was looking out the window when this started. As the president's motorcade was pulling through the main gate, a vehicle drove up from the opposite direction and detonated just outside the gate, followed closely by a van that unloaded a whole swarm of heavily armed guys. This was a coordinated assault on the main gate of a US embassy facility. Somebody knew about the change in plans, Mullaney. Somebody knew Kashani was coming here. Get me?"

Mullaney glanced over at the communications watch officer, who turned away from the other phone with a puzzled look on his face. "Yes, sir," said Mullaney. "We've got it. And it's on the recorder. What's happened to Kashani?"

"I'm not sure," said Cleveland. "Before we were hastily escorted into the safe rooms, one of the staff took a quick look out the window. There are some charred and mangled vehicles by the gate, some of the motorcade still in the street. Hard to tell who belongs to what, but the attackers are firing into the embassy grounds."

"Sounds like Kashani probably made it into the compound," said Mullaney.

"I don't know," said Cleveland. "Now, look . . . it's getting a little warm in here, and we certainly would like to get some breakfast. But get some people out here quickly and help those guys outside. It doesn't sound too good for them from where we're sitting."

"Our guys are on the way, Mr. Ambassador. Sit tight."

"Oh, we're not going anywhere, Mullaney. Not just yet. Okay," said Cleveland, "we'll keep the line open . . . as long as we can. Thanks, Mullaney. Good man."



*US Embassy, Ankara
April 24, 6:20 a.m.*

“Roger that.”

Tommy Hernandez, DSS chief of security for the ambassador and the embassy, turned away from his shoulder mic toward Cleveland. “Three of the guards are down.”

“How many attackers?”

Hernandez shook his head. “Don’t know, sir. But the captain is taking half of the marine detachment to add firepower at the front gate. The rest are staying to guard . . .”

An explosion rocked the compound, bigger than the one that started the attack.

“That is not good.” Hernandez got up off the bunk where the ambassador was sitting, pulled his Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun close to the body armor on his chest, and joined the marine sergeant flanking the door. He looked at the frightened faces in the hardened room. “Find something to get behind, to protect yourselves.”



Their safe haven wasn’t soundproof. Ambassador Cleveland and his staff could hear the incessant rattle of automatic weapons and the occasional explosion. So once again he walked around the small room, touching a shoulder here, whispering comfort there. Cleveland didn’t know what was going on outside, but he knew how to be a leader that others willingly followed.

Without warning, the gunfire stopped. It was as gut-wrenching a moment as when the first explosion detonated and their orderly world unraveled.

Cleveland turned toward the door. “Tommy?”

Hernandez had his head cocked to one side, over the mic on his shoulder, as if that would make it easier to hear the voice on the other end. “Roger that. We’ll wait for you.” He stood up straight. “Five attackers . . . all dead. None of them penetrated the embassy’s perimeter. President Kashani’s motorcade was halfway through the gate when the first explosion hit. Kashani’s vehicle made it inside. He’s okay. But we’re not going anywhere yet. Some Turkish military just showed up. A bunch of them are escorting Kashani back to his palace at warp speed. The marines are going to sweep the compound, and the remaining

Turkish military are going to secure the streets and make sure there aren't any more surprises out there."

Cleveland's chin dropped to his chest. "Thank you, Lord." When he looked up, several heads were nodding in agreement. "Tommy . . . what about our guards?"

Hernandez flexed his chin and shook his head. When he spoke, it was a whisper that carried thunder. "Three of our guards are dead. Two more are badly wounded. "Four of Kashani's security detail were killed in the first explosion. The marines are okay. The captain will give us the all clear when they know it's safe." He looked at the ambassador. "Looks like we dodged a bullet today, Mr. Ambassador. God is good."

Ops Center, Washington, DC

April 24, 12:57 a.m.

Noah Webster, deputy secretary of state for management and resources, was realistic and sensitive about two things ever since he went to high school—his height and the color of his skin. The needling he took about being short was blatant harassment, defeated somewhat when a growth spurt pushed him to five nine during his senior year. But the prejudice and discrimination he endured as a black man was more subtle, though no less real. Webster never outgrew his resentment of the constant discrimination against a black man in a white man's world.

But Webster fed on that resentment. He converted his anger into a catalyst that drove him not only to excel in the classroom and on the athletic field, but to prove himself better than—superior to—all the white kids who had looked down at him and treated him as if he were someone . . . less.

Webster may have been slight in stature, but he was tall enough to project command and require obedience. Since the Diplomatic Security Service and the State Department's operations center were directly under his authority, Webster stood in a small office in the rear corner of ops, surrounded by a cohort of his key staff. The postmortem of the Ankara attack was well underway. A new watch team was on duty in ops, the earlier crew split into several segments as the debrief was rigorously pursued in rooms throughout the Truman building.

Watch Liaison Officer Brian Mullaney leaned against a desk in a corner of the room, alongside his boss, George Morningstar, deputy assistant secretary for diplomatic security.

“Paul, please get Secretary Townsend on a line in my office,” said Webster, referring to Secretary of State Evan Townsend. “I’ll be there in moment.” Nodding to his executive assistant, Webster turned back to his waiting staff. “I want a draft press release on my desk in five minutes. Ryan, alert the press corps we’ll have a press conference”—he looked at his watch—“at fourteen hundred hours. Lydia, get CIA on a line and find out if they had *any* hints of a threat in Ankara. And Paul, wait, see if you can reach Ambassador Cleveland and get an update on him and the staff.”

“Mr. Secretary,” Morningstar interrupted, “as of eleven forty our time, the ambassador was safe and secure and so were all the embassy staff. They were all in safe havens with armed security during the attack. Mullaney talked to Ambassador Cleveland in the middle of the action and he was fine. But there is something . . .”

Webster was always disciplined and calculating, a survivor in the jungle that was Washington. Every move, every word, had a purpose and a message. He turned slowly to his right and faced Morningstar, cutting short his sentence. Webster’s words were silken and spiked. “*Mullaney* spoke to the ambassador?”

It never failed to give Noah Webster a thrill when he could wield power. A delicious iciness embraced his heart, bringing the hint of a smirk to the corners of his lips as he allowed Morningstar to dangle on the implication of his question.

“Yes, sir.”

Morningstar did not appear flummoxed. *Hmmm . . . unfortunate. I’ll have to try harder next time.*

“Mullaney was on duty as watch liaison officer when the call came in. During the conversation, Ambassador Cleveland expressed his concern that the attackers may have received some inside information about President Kashani’s change of plans. Cleveland was scheduled to meet Kashani at the palace this morning, but that changed at the last minute. It appears the attackers knew that Kashani and the ambassador were at the embassy and not at the palace.”

“And the ambassador relayed these concerns to Agent Mullaney?”

“Yes, Mr. Secretary.”

Within his chest, a lance of dread pierced Webster's heart. For a fraction of a second, doubt coated his confidence. Was he in danger? He was deep into a clandestine, unsanctioned, high-stakes play with the prime minister of Turkey, a scheme he was certain was in the best interests of the United States. But a scheme he was also certain must remain a secret.

"All right. We'll deal with that. But for the moment, I want our best available medical team flown into Ankara immediately. Find one of our people on the ground there who isn't too shaken up, and make contact with the families of the dead and injured. Lydia, prepare a crisis management team to deal with the embassy staff—get them all the help they need. And now let's get ready for that press conference."

Webster started walking toward the door, but looked back over his shoulder. "And Morningstar," Webster said, the smile of a snake on his face, "would you and Mullaney please step into my office for a moment, as soon as I complete my call with the secretary?"