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## EMPIRES OF ARMAGEDDON

*Ishmael Covenant*

*Persian Betrayal*

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## JERUSALEM PROPHECIES

*The Sacred Cipher*

*The Brotherhood Conspiracy*

*The Aleppo Code*

# PERSIAN BETRAYAL

EMPIRES OF ARMAGEDDON #2

TERRY  
BRENNAN



KREGEL  
PUBLICATIONS

*Persian Betrayal*

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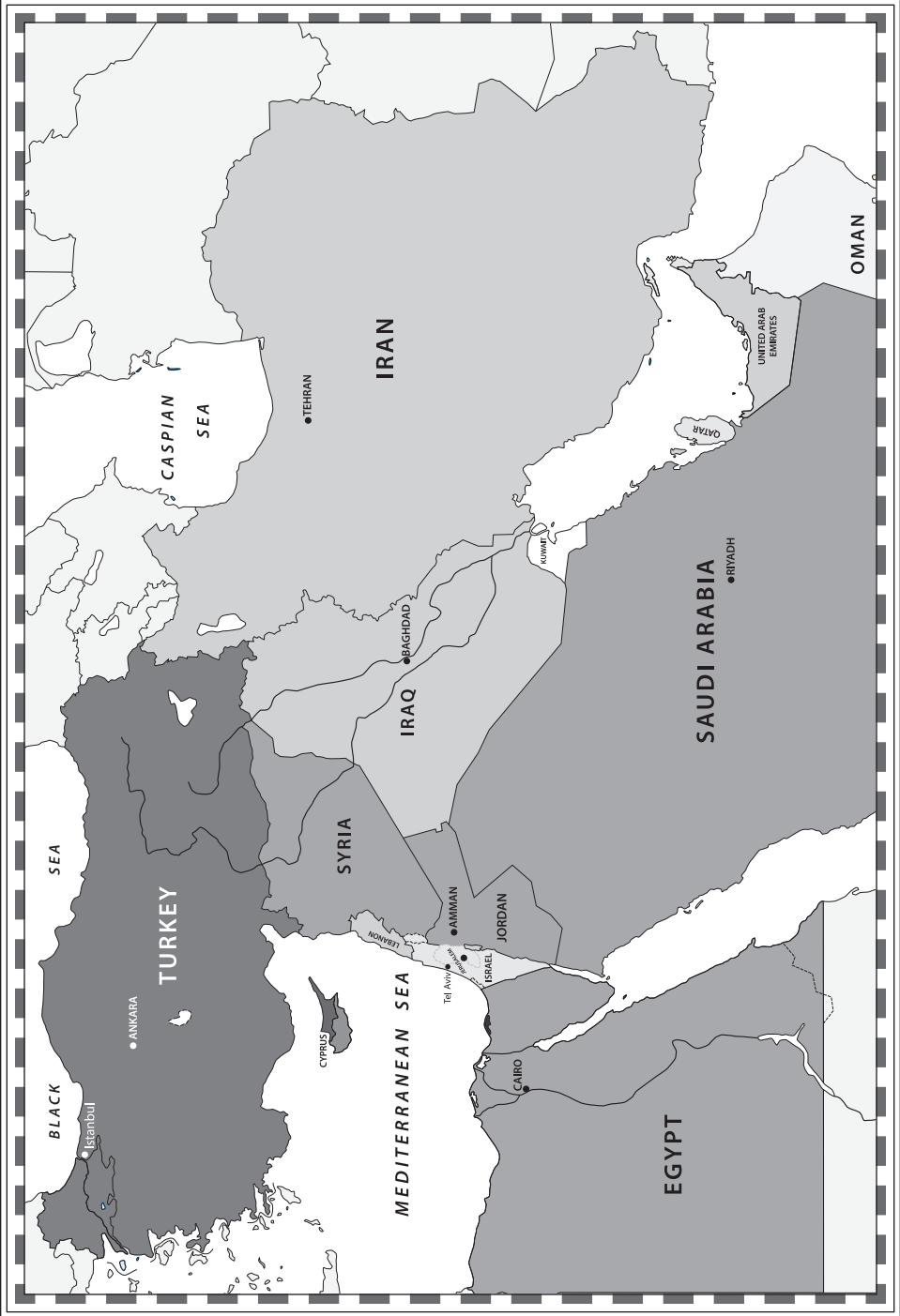
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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## *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 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; Mullaney's best friend

**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 diplomatic security

**Ruth Hughes**—Political officer, US embassy, Tel Aviv

**Jeffrey Archer**—Cleveland's secretary at the ambassador's residence and the US embassy in Tel Aviv

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

**Richard Rutherford**—Billionaire Georgian 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

**Meyer Levinson**—Director, Operations Division, Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency

***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

***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, personal bodyguards of the king and his family

# PROLOGUE

## *The Alush Gorge, Arabia* 1446 BC

The sharp aroma of charcoal—a thousand fires extinguished in the dawn’s first light—mingled with the desert dew and hung in the early morning air. Standing at the forefront of the vast army of Israel, Joshua looked over his right shoulder, across the Valley of Rephidim. In the east, he could see the outlined bodies of Moses, Aaron, and Hur—the captain of Moses’s personal guard—standing on top of a hill, the highest in the region. The sun was rising behind them, and the staff of God, raised high in Moses’s hand, appeared to be shimmering, sparks leaping from it, crackling like bolts of lightning.

It was the sound of drums from across the plain that arrested Joshua’s thoughts and brought his concentration back to the battle forming before him. Abner and Hiram stood at either shoulder. Behind him, aligned along an east-west axis on the southern rim of the Rephidim plain, stood half the army of Israel—thirty thousand fighting men from Joshua’s tribe of Judah, each man carefully selected; another thirty thousand each from the tribes of Dan and Simeon; twenty thousand each from Reuben, Gad, Ephraim, and Asher. Behind that first phalanx stood a second wave of Jewish soldiers from the other five tribes—in total over two hundred thousand veteran fighting men.

Across the plain, Joshua estimated at least one hundred thousand sons of Amalek waited in the shadows of the dawn. Yesterday, a phalanx of these mounted desert raiders had fallen upon the last remnant of the Israelite column slowly working its way through the Alush Gorge. Joshua’s soldiers rallied to form a wedge of protection around the weak and defenseless stragglers and repelled these descendants of Ishmael. But the Amalekites were back, even more determined to destroy the people of Israel and the army at its head. The enemy warriors, their black, green, and brown robes flapping behind them like battle flags, were mostly mounted on swift, powerful desert stallions. From a strictly military point of view, Joshua expected he would need to employ every one of his infantry to overcome the Amalekite horsemen. But then there was Moses—and the staff of God.



After glancing once more to the hill to the east where Moses stood firm, the staff held high, Joshua lifted his right arm, his old, nicked sword sharpened to a lethal edge. "For the glory of our God and in the name of Jehovah."

Behind Joshua, in a wave that reverberated through the ranks of soldiers, two hundred thousand voices joined in the declaration, "For the glory of our God and in the name of Jehovah."

And the host of Israel stepped out to cross the plain. In the distance, a great, swirling cloud of dust rose in the north, the mounted horde of Amalek racing toward them, committed to the annihilation of the Jews.

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Twelve hours later, Moses still sat on a rock on the hill to the east, the staff of God held high above his head. His arms were pale, his fingers turning a shade of light blue. At times during the day, Moses actually dozed off in the heat of the sun. But the staff never faltered.

First Aaron and Hur, then in succession other teams of Moses's personal guard, took turns supporting his arms and the staff. And through the day, the army of Israel punished the bandits of Amalek, pushing them back across the field, slaughtering their horses as they fell, leaving alive no Amalekite warrior who came under their sword.

As the sun slipped behind the low hills to the west, what little was left of the Amalekite army withdrew in defeat, riding north to escape the inexorable fury of the Israelite fighters.

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When the last stone was set in the altar, Moses approached and rested the staff of God on its edge. The army of Israel surrounded the altar, built at the base of the hill on which Aaron and Hur had held Moses's arms aloft during the battle. Moses lifted his left arm. "Come, Joshua."

Aware of the blood that covered his arms and his armor, conscious of the filth that crusted over his legs and his feet, Joshua held fast. He was covered with death. How could he approach an altar?

"Come, Joshua. Come . . . stand by me," said Moses.

The old man reached out his hand toward Joshua, who did not have the power or strength left to refuse. Joshua stepped to Moses's side.

Moses smiled at Joshua, then turned to the army and lifted the staff above his head.

"Today God fought for us," said Moses. "And he destroyed the army of Amalek. But know this." Moses took the staff and pointed it at the armed soldiers surrounding the altar. Deliberately, he moved the point of the staff in an arc that encompassed all of the army. "While we were on the hill, the Lord spoke to me. The Lord said, 'Moses, write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.' We will call this altar Jehovah-Nissi, the Lord is our banner, for hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord. And the Lord has sworn here, this day, that the Lord will be at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation."

The army of Israel raised a shout and sounded the shofar so that the hills of Rephidim rained praises on the bloody plain. But Moses stepped closer to Joshua and spoke so that only he could hear.

"My son, hear my words. The Lord has a message for you, your children, and your children's children. Remember what the Amalekites did here, when our people were weary and worn-out. They cut off those who were weak and lagging behind. They had no fear of God. Tell your children this . . . When the Lord your God gives you rest from your enemies and the land of the inheritance, you are still to go out and blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. The Lord says, 'Do not forget!'"

*Hurva Square, Jerusalem, Israel*  
*July 20, 2014, 1:14 p.m.*

Rabbi Chaim Yavod raced into Jerusalem's Hurva Square, choking on the thick, swirling stone dust that encased the square in a malevolent fog. He leaped over huge shards of fractured stone and concrete—white, arched remnants of the Hurva Synagogue's once magnificent dome. A symphony of horror filled the square nearly as thick as the stone dust—moans of the wounded and maimed, wails of survivors as they stumbled over the bodies of those who were not, shrill and urgent sirens promising help but not prevention.

Only moments earlier he had been sent to fetch Rabbi Herzog's car. Then, in a mounding tide of rumbling destruction, the world that Chaim Yavod knew best was obliterated.

The convulsions of the first explosion ripped the door of the black Toyota out of Yavod's hand and knocked him back onto the uneven surface of the small parking lot. The ground shifting under his shoulder blades, Yavod felt three additional explosions shudder the stones of the street. He looked up, above the rooftops toward the north. What looked like a volcanic eruption of smoke, stone, and debris was roiling ever higher over the square that contained the Hurva Synagogue—outside of the Western Wall, the most revered symbol of Jewish worship in Jerusalem.

Now Yavod frantically scrambled through the destruction in the Hurva Square toward the smoking, shattered remains of the synagogue. The sickening fear tearing at his heart pushed aside any concern about delivering the envelope inside his jacket pocket—the decoded second prophecy from the Vilna Gaon. Israel Herzog, chief rabbi of the Israeli Rabbinic Council, his friend and superior, was probably somewhere under the collapsed dome and crumbled walls of what had once been Israel's most beautiful synagogue. Was Herzog alive . . . any other members of the council who were with him? Could he save them? Yavod pressed on through the escalating havoc.



*The Old City, Jerusalem**July 20, 1:14 p.m.*

The leader consciously forced himself to keep a leisurely pace in the midst of the mayhem. The bombers were three strides north on Habad Street, headed for the souks—the three, parallel covered markets of the Old City—and the Damascus Gate, beyond which they could disappear. All around them, people were racing: Israelis and Arabs alike ran toward the site of the explosions in the Hurva Square, while tourists, mothers, and children fled the dust and the terror.

The two bombers looked like worn and weary workmen headed to lunch when the leader thrust out his right arm and grabbed his partner by the sleeve of his dirty work shirt, causing a brief human pileup behind them. The leader pulled his partner close to a building facing the street.

“We need to go back.”

“Risky,” said his partner.

“Yes,” the leader admitted, “but we need to see for ourselves. We know,” he said, lowering his voice and looking side to side at the human tide moving past them, “that our work succeeded. But we need to give a report. It was a mistake not to make sure that the results were . . . effective. We don’t want to make another mistake. You’ll learn. Mistakes are not well tolerated. Come.”

Ignoring his partner’s unspoken reluctance, the leader turned to his left and began walking against the flow. He turned left on Hashalshelet, the Street of the Chain, away from the crowds, then quickly right into a narrow, curving walkway. Halfway along Tif’eret Yisrael Street the leader saw a stone walkway ascending between two buildings on his right.

“Wait.”

He bounded up the stairs two at a time but stopped a head short of the top. In Israel, as was true throughout the Middle East, rooftops were often actively used as alternative living space, particularly in the cooler evening hours. It was possible this rooftop could be occupied. He peeked over the edge, left then right. No one. No chairs. No potted plants. To the right more steps led up to a second flat roof. He looked up to the higher roof, straight into the smoke and debris cloud gently settling over Hurva Square. He could hear the cacophony on the other side of the building, in Hurva Square, but no sounds closer. With a quick wave to his partner, he pushed himself over the edge and moved toward the second set of stairs.

He moved up these stairs more cautiously. He took one step and paused, then another and paused. The fifth step brought his head level with the upper roof. He peeked over the edge. This roof held signs of being used, but it was unoccupied at the moment. The vast, open Hurva Square lay beyond its edge. As if he were walking on an ice bridge in the spring, his body in a crouch, he edged to a small parapet wall at the end of the roof. A slight breeze carried the smoke, dust, and cries for help off to the west, giving the leader a fairly clear view of his handiwork—carnage, destruction, chaos.

Front to back, the Hurva sat on a north-south axis, the front of the building and the large, open Hurva Square on the southern side. He and his partner were now situated on a rooftop looking northwest, kitty-corner across the square, toward the ancient minaret of the Caliph Omar mosque on the far side. The Hurva, when it stood, was a massive square building of Jerusalem stone and masonry walls, almost its entire bulk covered by a huge dome. Now the Hurva looked like a squashed egg.

For maximum destruction of the synagogue, and everything and anyone inside it, the first twin explosions had cracked the spine of the building. Then another set of explosions obliterated the walls at the corners, causing the majority of the destruction to fall in upon itself, like a deflating accordion. But the blasts had also hurled huge chunks of stone wall and concrete arch in every direction around the building.

The trees in the square were shattered and stunted by the blasts, the umbrella-covered open-air restaurant tables that offered shade and respite for tourists were thrown against the walls of the adjacent buildings.

A retaining wall of Jerusalem stone, two stories high, was tied into and ran across the rear of the synagogue, accounting for the higher elevation of Ha-Yehudim Street. That retaining wall and a square chunk of the rear of the building attached to the wall were the only parts of the Hurva that had survived the blasts.

Below, butchery littered the vastness of the Hurva Square. Police and medical first responders were rushing around, looking for the living and covering the dead. Wails of grief battled with the still incoming sirens.

“Let’s watch a moment.”



*US Embassy, Tel Aviv, Israel*  
*July 20, 1:16 p.m.*

In two hours, Rabbi Israel Herzog was scheduled to arrive with a secret that promised to make Brian Mullaney's life even more unpredictable and out of control.

The last two days—was it only two days?—had been relentless, seemingly endless, interrupted by only a few hours of sleep. He needed to shake off the weary exhaustion that was draining his muscles and dulling his brain. The daily security of hundreds of diplomatic staff rested squarely on his shoulders. Recently banished to Israel, his appointment as the US State Department's Middle East Regional Security Officer (RSO) was little solace for the fact that his career was on life support.

The phone rang.

"Mullaney."

"Sir, it's Floyd Bishop at the consul general's residence. There's been an explosion in the Old City. I think the Hurva's just been blown up."

---

*Hurva Square, Jerusalem*  
*July 20, 1:17 p.m.*

Chaim skirted the eastern edge of the square. A slight breeze had begun to move some of the choking dust to the west. Scrambling his way around giant pieces of wreckage, tearing up the flesh of his hands on the knifelike edges, and avoiding the growing crowd of civilians pouring into the square to help, he fixed his eyes on his destination—an arched doorway on the north side of the synagogue, at the base of the retaining wall, that led to a lower-level hallway and the offices of the Rabbinate Council on the western flank of the Hurva.

Inside the arch, the door and its frame were no longer vertical. The door-frame canted to the right at a forty-five-degree angle, the door itself sprung open and hanging precariously from only one hinge. Chaim closed the distance, keeping a hopeful eye on the door for any sign of life and a wary eye on the still smoldering rubble mound to his left that continued to disgorge debris onto the square. He acknowledged to himself the fear that was adding lead weights to his limbs but, with a deep breath, cast the fear aside and pressed himself through the precarious opening into the underbelly of destruction.

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*The Old City, Jerusalem**July 20, 1:18 p.m.*

The leader of the bombers had his eyes on the square below and his mobile phone to his ear.

"The synagogue is destroyed. The rabbis and their package are now buried under tons of wreckage collapsed in upon itself."

"Where are you?" asked the leader of the Disciples.

"On a rooftop overlooking the square."

"Remain. Make sure no one has escaped. Do not get caught."

The leader closed the phone and stuffed it in his pants pocket just as his accomplice poked him on the shoulder.

"You see . . . there is one. Looks like a rabbi," said the accomplice, as the thin, black-coated man gingerly approached a darkened archway in the retaining wall to their right.

They hunkered close to the parapet, their eyes on the slight figure who slipped into the darkness.

"He goes in," said his companion.

"Yes. And we wait until . . . if . . . he comes out."

---

*US Embassy, Tel Aviv**July 20, 1:18 p.m.*

Habit and training prompted Mullaney to swing his chair to the left toward the three-foot-square Jerusalem street map that was attached to a huge cloth board in his office at the US embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Even though he had only been "boots on the ground" in Israel for two weeks, he knew where the consul general's residence was located—on Gershon Agron Street across from the sprawling Independence Park, in an Americanized compound less than a mile from the Old City.

Floyd Bishop was a seasoned and respected agent of the Diplomatic Security Service, someone who could be trusted. But Mullaney needed all the facts. "How do you know it was the Hurva?"

"I don't. I can't be certain," said Bishop. "But as soon as I heard the explosions and felt the ground move, I grabbed a pair of binoculars and ran up to the

roof. We're on a rise, and the rear of the building looks out over the Old City. There was still a cloud of debris and smoke in the air to pinpoint the location. The explosion was pretty much due east of here, north of the Zion Gate . . . sort of split the distance between St. James Cathedral and David's Tower. I can't see it clearly through the smoke and ash, even with binoculars, but the Hurva is less than two thousand yards away from here in that very spot. And that's where the debris cloud is. If I had to make a bet—"

"Okay," said Mullaney, "take a—"

"Listen, Brian—excuse me, sir," said Bishop, acknowledging Mullaney's rank, "but that was a huge explosion—actually several explosions if I counted correctly. There's going to be a lot of dead people over there, sir. A lot of tourists. Could be some of ours."

Mullaney wiped a hand down his lined face and then scanned the map in front of him, calculating. In his nineteen years in the Diplomatic Security Service, he'd approached every assignment with constant vigilance, articulate intelligence, and an external calm that carried over to all those with whom he served.

Now the world kept blowing up around him. Mullaney was responsible for protecting the lives of every individual assigned to the US diplomatic mission to Israel and—by extension, he believed—responsible for every American soul in the land of Israel.

But he was failing miserably in fulfilling those responsibilities. First Palmyra Parker, the ambassador's daughter, was kidnapped and now—probably because of a decision he made—the historic Hurva Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem, Israel's most beautiful place of worship, was a smoldering pile of rubble. Only minutes earlier, Rabbi Israel Herzog called him from inside the Hurva, announcing that the Rabbinic Council had cracked the code of a two-hundred-year-old prophecy that Mullaney hoped would put an end to the death and mayhem that followed the scrap of parchment from Germany to Turkey to Israel. Was Herzog still in the synagogue when . . .

Mullaney held the phone to his ear, but there was little that was holding up his hope. "All right, Floyd, how many agents on duty over there?"

"Eight, at least—could be more if some of the agents stuck around after the shift change."

"How's your exterior security?" asked Mullaney. He visualized the long,



high stone wall, topped by wrought iron fencing, that ran along the front of the compound on Gershon Agron Street.

"We're solid," said Bishop. "Mostly Israeli nationals—long-time service guys who are ex-IDF—with one of our agents in charge. We're solid here, Brian, and we're the closest."

Mullaney walked to the window and looked to the east where, forty-four miles distant in the Judean hill country, the contested city of Jerusalem was located. Still a formidable physical presence in his midforties, the spreading streaks of gray at his temples were a testimony to the daily stress he carried on his broad shoulders. Today he also fought the twin scourges of guilt and discouragement.

"All right, Floyd. Take a team of four and get to the Hurva as quickly as you can. I'll call Shin Bet and let them know you are going to be on-site shortly. Stay there until you get some information about any victims—and whether any of the victims are American citizens. And also check into the status of the rabbis at the synagogue. The chief rabbi there, Israel Herzog, was working with us on something very important. See what you can find out and call me back."



*Hurva Square, Jerusalem*

*July 20, 1:20 p.m.*

Gray clouds of grit floated in the air, blocking out the sun as Chaim Yavod ducked under the skewed portal and entered the deeper darkness of the devastated Hurva. He left behind a swelling symphony of sirens and a frantic, growing assemblage—some with yarmulkes bobbing on their heads with every effort, others in shorts and T-shirts—frantically digging in the stony rubble that was once the most beautiful of synagogues.

Before him to the left ran a still discernable corridor, half of it collapsed, now an obstacle course of crushed stone and concrete shards, twisted reinforcing rods, and piles of rubble. Every few feet, a shaft of light sliced in through the shattered walls, now partially open to the sun, illuminating a frantic dance of dust and encasing the remnants of the corridor in a pallid fog. Yavod skittered around the fallen masonry, unaware of the blood trail left behind by his lacerated fingertips.

He had only been gone a moment to get the car requested by Rabbi Herzog.

He had only been gone a moment when the great dome was cloven down the middle, when the earth was rent from beneath his feet, when the unleashed roar of the explosions ripped past him like thunder down a valley's rift. Only a moment, but his world rested in ruins as devastating as the destruction under his feet.

He had to find the rabbi. He had to.

He reached the end of the corridor where three steps led left, to a lower level and the offices of the Rabbinat Council. What was once the ceiling had collapsed, reducing the corridor's height by half. Yavod lowered himself down the stairs, then bent over in a crouch, keeping his feet under him to navigate the ongoing debris field as he inched along the corridor toward the council's offices. The light faded. Yavod had to feel his way through the darkness. A gaping yaw of black stopped him. The front wall of the council's offices had been blown across the corridor, blocking most of it with a massive pile of ruin, leaving the interior of the offices wide open but shrouded in gloom.

Yavod scuffed his shoe through some of the rubble at his feet and found a broken piece of Shabbat candle in the dust. He lit the candle, held it in front of him at arm's length, and moved into the blackened office, pulling along an anchor of despair.



*US Embassy, Tel Aviv*

*July 20, 1:21 p.m.*

Tommy Hernandez, Mullaney's right hand and head of personal security for US Ambassador Joseph Cleveland, stood in the open doorway. "What's up?"

Mullaney ended the call with Bishop and punched in a new number. "Bishop . . . from the consul's residence. Said it looks like the Hurva Synagogue has just been blown up," he said, the words as leaden as the despair in his heart. "Several explosions, he thinks."

"Herzog? The box?" asked Hernandez.

"Don't know . . . don't know anything yet," said Mullaney as he waited for his call to be answered, "but it looks like our enemies are getting more desperate. Why don't—"

The voice on the other end of the call didn't waste time with etiquette. "The Hurva is a pile of smoking rubble. This has something to do with the box, right?"

“Meyer—”

“You told me you would fill me in with all of the important details.” The voice of Meyer Levinson, director of the operations division of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security apparatus, was firm but not stained with blame. “You can keep your promise on the helicopter. Get to Hanger C at Ben Gurion as quickly as you can.”

“Twenty minutes, if I’m lucky,” said Mullaney.

“Fifteen or we go without you.”

“Okay, but you—”

The call disconnected.

Mullaney looked up at Hernandez, who was leaning against the door jamb.

“Meyer a little testy?”

“Yeah,” said Mullaney. He shook his head. “This day just keeps getting worse.” He took a deep breath. *Too much happening . . . gotta stay in the game.* He pushed a button on the telephone console on his desk. “I need a car at the front gate, now.”

He grabbed his suit jacket with one hand and Tommy Hernandez’s left arm with the other and pulled him along toward the stairs. “I need you to stay with the ambassador,” said Mullaney. “Don’t let him out of your sight. I mean it, Tommy. Everywhere he goes, you go.”

“We’re in the embassy, Brian.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Mullaney as he started down the stairs two at a time. “And I don’t care. Have somebody with you at all times too. We’re taking no chances. And call Pat McKeon at the residence. I want her and a second agent glued to Palmyra Parker. Double the watch here and at the residence. And double the watch at all the consular offices in Jerusalem. As of now we’re running twelve-hour shifts and nobody gets a day off. Got it?”

*Ben Gurion Airport, Tel Aviv**July 20, 1:37 p.m.*

Mullaney raised his arms so the Israeli soldier could fasten the harness around his body. He was seated on a bench that was bolted to the wall and ran down the length of the Sikorsky CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter which was now flexing its rotors in earnest. Meyer Levinson sat beside him on the bench, to his right, holding in his hands an identical twin to the headset and mic he had just slipped over his bald head. On the far bench were six uniformed Shin Bet officers, belted in but with no headsets. As the chopper lifted with a roar and banked hard to the east, Levinson handed the headset to Mullaney.

“Seven confirmed dead,” Levinson said into the mic. “But there will be a lot more.” He glanced left at Mullaney. “Tell me what I need to know, Brian.”

Only yesterday, the story had seemed so far-fetched that Mullaney had been reluctant to share with Levinson what he knew about the metal box from Lithuania and the message it supposedly carried. Now, there was no hesitation. Mullaney had rehearsed his response on the drive from the US embassy. “Before leaving his assignment in Turkey, Ambassador Cleveland visited the synagogue of an old friend in Istanbul. He left that meeting in possession of a wooden box. Inside the wooden box was a metal box. There were kabbalah symbols hammered into the lid of the metal box.” Mullaney shifted to his right as much as the restrictive harness would allow, to get a better look at Levinson. “Inside the metal box was supposedly a second prophecy from the Vilna Gaon, a prophecy that had been hidden and protected in the Istanbul synagogue for generations.”

Levinson raised a cautionary hand. “Second prophecy? Vilna Gaon? Help me here.”

Grimacing, Mullaney nodded his head. “Yeah, okay. I’m trying to keep this condensed. I’m told the Vilna Gaon was the wisest Talmudic scholar of his time—maybe any time. Literally, a genius with a prodigious photographic memory and a vast reservoir of both sacred and secular knowledge. Not only did he correct mistakes throughout the entire Talmud, he wrote a book about

mathematics that was considered centuries before its time. Earlier this year the Gaon's great-great-grandson revealed the existence of a prophecy written over two hundred years ago that—

"Messiah," said Levinson. "Yes, I remember. The prophecy said when the Russians take over Crimea it's a sign that the coming of Messiah is at hand. Put on your Shabbat clothes . . . Messiah is coming. Something like that."

"Right," said Mullaney. "The prophecy was written in 1794. The Russians invaded and occupied the Ukraine and Crimea just four months ago. Caused a bit of a stir, I understand."

"And this box supposedly had another, a second, prophecy from the Gaon?" asked Levinson. "But"—he twisted his head to look directly into Mullaney's eyes—"this prophecy was killing people?"

Again, Mullaney grimaced and nodded his head. "Well, something like that. We're not sure what was doing the killing, the prophecy itself or the metal box with the kabbalah symbols. But it appears that if anyone touches the box without the proper anointing . . . well, death is pretty swift."

"And gruesome?"

"Yeah, pretty bad," said Mullaney, staring at the floor of the chopper as he recalled the body of one of the housekeeping staff at the ambassador's residence, who inadvertently came in contact with the box. "Tongue turns black, hair falls out, start bleeding from the eyes."

"Sounds like a good reason to avoid the box," said Levinson. "But that's why the ambassador's daughter was kidnapped, right? To be held for ransom. Somebody wants the box or the prophecy. Or somebody wants its power."

"A whole lot of somebodies, it appears," said Mullaney.

"So why the Hurva?"

"That's my fault."

"Okay, we'll lock you up."

With a start, Mullaney looked up at Levinson, a man with whom he had forged a strong friendship years earlier during Levinson's assignment in Washington as head of security for the Israeli embassy. "What?"

Levinson's eyes softened, and he took a deep breath. "None of this is your fault, Brian. You've been through the ringer over and over the last two days. One crisis after another. And you must be exhausted. But"—Levinson put his hand on Mullaney's right arm—"you need to stay focused. None of this is your

fault. There are some bad guys out there who are killing people for that box. And we're going to find them. Now, why the Hurva?"

Mullaney nodded his head, but this time with resolution, a determined set to his jaw. *Yeah, we are going to find them.*

"Two things the rabbi in Istanbul told Ambassador Cleveland," he said. "First, the expectation passed down for generations was that the prophecy would be in code—just as the first one was in code—that only a Talmudic scholar would be able to crack. Second, the rabbis who were guardians of the box believed the prophecy would reveal the name of the Man of Violence."

"Wait," Levinson raised his hand. "Who is—what is—the Man of Violence?"

"Honestly, I have no clue," said Mullaney. "Ambassador Cleveland was instructed to get the box to the Rabbinic Council at the Hurva, men who had the learning to open the box and understand the prophecy, and his task would be complete. One of the chief rabbis, Israel Herzog, came to the residence earlier today, and we placed the wooden box and its contents into his hands. He called me not long ago and told me that his council had deciphered the message. He said, *'Prepare yourself for another shock. What I'm bringing to you will radically alter the meaning of what was announced today.'*"

Less than two hours earlier, Israel had entered into a treaty and a mutual-defense pact with the majority of its neighbors: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and most of the Persian Gulf states, nations formed from the nomadic Arab people who, like the Amalekites before them, were all the descendants of Ishmael. From the day God chose between Abraham's sons—when Isaac was declared the heir of promise and Ishmael was banished into the desert—the two blood lines had been in conflict. That conflict became deadly when Israel was declared a sovereign nation in 1948. Since then the Arab states, the sons of Ishmael, had fought—and lost—three major wars against Israel, the sons of Isaac. Now, with the signing in Amman, Jordan, of what was being called the Ishmael Covenant, Israel was at peace with most of its former enemies for the first time in sixty-six years.

"The covenant?" asked Levinson. "The covenant and this two-hundred-year-old prophecy are linked?"

The helicopter banked left and started a long, looping swing back to the north.

"I don't know, Meyer," Mullaney admitted. "Honestly, I'm not sure if I understand what any of this has been about—at least not yet. All I know is that the metal box and the prophecy were at the Hurva when Rabbi Herzog called. I don't know if any of them—the rabbi, the box, or the message—survived the explosions. But my gut tells me we can't allow the box or what it contains to fall into the hands of whoever is behind all of this violence."

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*Hurva Square, Jerusalem*

*July 20, 1:43 p.m.*

The devastation to the council's offices was nearly complete. It looked as if the entire upper structure of the Hurva Synagogue had collapsed in upon itself and plummeted into the basement. Huge slabs of stone resting at wildly diverse angles were jammed into the area once occupied by the council. The flickering light of the candle guiding only one step at a time, Yavod pressed through narrow gaps, zigzagging his way deeper into the office toward the area where he last saw Rabbi Herzog and the council, his hope as wavering as the flame in front of him.

As if writhing in pain, the ruins of the Hurva bellowed forth a relentless, threatening groan, covering Yavod with a shower of small rubble, adding another cloud of dust to the nearly impenetrable air in the basement. He feared that his time was short if he hoped to escape the Hurva alive.

Yavod squeezed past the crushed and splintered remains of the resplendent Torah Ark that once dominated the northern wall of the Hurva's upper-floor sanctuary, carefully avoided a razor-sharp shard of concrete, and found himself staring at the table he had left just half an hour earlier. Two slabs of concrete had fallen into each other, creating an inverted V. Yavod could see nothing holding the implausibly balanced concrete in place, only a shimmering vibration in the dense dust above where the table was sheltered in the small opening. The table survived, but around it was death and destruction. Blood splatters covered the table and the surfaces of the concrete. One black-clad arm, its hand in a fist, protruded from behind the edge of the slab on the right. On the floor to the left, Rabbi Israel Herzog sat—tons of concrete in his lap. Herzog's unseeing eyes and silent mouth were open, his left arm outstretched toward the two boxes that still sat under the bloody lamb's fleece in the center of the table to his left.

Another death groan shook the Hurva. A large chunk of concrete fell, grazing Yavod's right shoulder. Instinctively, he put the candle on the desk. Lifting his eyes to heaven in a prayer for protection, Yavod put his hands on the lambskin, lifted the metal box and placed the skin-wrapped metal box inside the larger wooden box. He pulled off his black coat and once again remembered the envelope tucked into the inside pocket. He should get the deciphered prophecy to agent Mullaney. But then what about the box? He would have to give up the box also.

There was no time to think. Working swiftly, Yavod wrapped up the wooden box in his black coat, pressed it against his body with his left arm, picked up the sputtering candle—

And he stopped.

Rabbi Chaim Yavod looked down at the crushed body of his friend and benefactor, Israel Herzog, and began to recite the Jewish prayer for the dead, *El Malei Rachamim*. "God, full of mercy, who dwells in the heights . . .," he finished, and then repeated the prayer over and over again as he left the dead behind and pushed himself through the tangled concrete canyons, back toward the light.



*The Old City, Jerusalem**July 20, 1:59 p.m.*

The Shin Bet helicopter landed in a cleared parking lot about one hundred yards southeast of the Zion Gate, the southernmost access through Jerusalem's Old City wall and the closest entrance to Hurva Square. Mullaney cast a quick glance at the pockmarked facade of the Zion Gate, bullet riddled during a series of ferocious battles during the 1967 war, in which all of Jerusalem and the entire Old City came under Israeli rule. But he had little time to reflect. Levinson and his squad were hustling through the twisting Zion Gate. Mullaney sprinted to catch up and jumped into the last of the waiting Jeeps as they headed north on Ararat Street.

Mullaney desperately clung to the side of the speeding Jeep as it careened through the twisting streets of the Old City. They came into Hurva Square at the southwest corner, near Bet El Street, and skidded to a halt at the very edge of the square. Before them was triage in public.

Red-and-blue flashing lights from ambulances and police cars parked along the perimeter of the destruction reflected off the broken pieces of white masonry blasted about the square. In spite of the heat, which was oppressive, hundreds of people were frantically scrambling over the debris, some tending to the wounded or the dying, some pulling away rubble with their bare hands.

His cell phone to his ear, Mullaney had to fight growing rage as he surveyed the destruction. "Bishop?" Mullaney said as his call was answered. "I'm in the square. Where are you?"

"On the east side, across the street from the square," said Bishop. "Jerusalem police set up an impromptu command post and threw up a medical tent on the sidewalk. Our guys are going through the square. They know to report to me here."

Mullaney looked around. *Good as any.* "I'm on my way."

He turned to Levinson, who was directing his squad members. "Jerusalem police have a CP over on the right. I'm heading there."

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Yavod threw the nearly spent candle on the floor as he approached the diagonal beam of light promising escape into Hurva Square. He felt naked. No hat. No jacket. Several of his fingertips were bleeding, and blood oozed around a ragged rip in the right knee of his trousers. He looked at the bundle tucked under his left arm. *Now what? What am I going to do with it? Where am I going to take it? How am I going to get there?*

Yavod stepped beside the now angular doorway and peeked outside. Shouts. Cries. People running. Sirens. And now a bleeding man with a box under his arm, trying to look inconspicuous. But he couldn't stay here. His right hand grabbed ahold of the tilted doorframe, and he stepped into the light.

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They say killers return to the scene of the crime. No one noticed.

The two bombers were tucked into a corner of the parapet. Other onlookers were on other rooftops surrounding the square, the drama of human suffering—other people's suffering—seducing them like a drug. Still, from this vantage point, they were virtually invisible to those on the other rooftops. They could see into Hurva Square but not be seen by the scores of people rushing to the rescue. And the police. Yes . . . the police.

"We can't stay here any longer . . . it's too dangerous."

The leader kept his eyes scanning across the mayhem he helped create, but his partner in crime was correct. They had stayed too close, too long. Each of them, the Disciples, had pledged their life—and their death—to hasten the arrival of the Mahdi. But . . . the leader of the Disciples would exact a stiff price if they were caught. "You're right, we need to—"

The words caught, stillborn, in his throat. He lifted a hand and placed it upon his partner's arm. Across the littered but open space of the square, a thin man emerged from the darkened archway to their right. Covered with stone dust, he clutched something under his left arm, close to his side.

"Is it the same man?"

"So it seems," said the leader. "He has taken off his coat and wrapped it around what he holds against his side." Even though it was covered, the leader could see distinct edges, a square shape.

The man emerged into the burning sun of the square, now cleared of dust,

hunched over, stumbling, his right hand shading his eyes from the blinding light. He looked to his right, toward the ongoing rescue efforts in the rest of the square. Then, as if protecting a treasure, he wrapped his other arm around the box and headed in the opposite direction, to his left, toward a set of stone steps.

"He has the box," said his partner.

"So it seems," he said, looking left and right. No police watching. "We will not allow him out of our sight."

"But it has not killed him."

"So it seems."

The leader tapped his partner on the elbow. "Let's go." They pushed away from the parapet, launching them to their feet in pursuit of the rabbi, down the stairs, away from the roof, the street below, and the dead and maimed that never once crossed their conscience.



The man with the box limped away from the square and continued down Tiferet Yisrael Street, deeper into the labyrinthian byways of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. The leader moved into the light at the edge of the doorway and looked to his left, down the sloping Tiferet Yisrael Street. Then he motioned for his partner and the two of them left their hiding place, turned left and followed the man with the box.