

**Critical praise for *8 Seconds to Midnight*,  
the 2018 IAN Book of the Year for an  
Outstanding Thriller/Suspense:**

**Paul F. Johnson for Readers' Favorite:** If you're a reader of thrillers and appreciate stories with everything that goes with them—intrigue, murder, planned destruction and terrorists—then you can't go wrong with *8 Seconds to Midnight*. John Leifer grabs the reader from the first pages and doesn't let go. The author has created an exceptional story filled with everything that makes a thriller a thriller. The cast of characters—the good guys and the bad—is superbly developed and the plot is filled with action and suspense all the way to a satisfying ending. The story moves along at break-neck pace, leaving the reader expectantly waiting to turn to the next page. Very good story, very entertaining. I highly recommend this book.

**Catherine Langrehr for IndieReader:** This is a great book if what you want is a vigorous, action-packed thriller with lots of suspense, dramatic last-minute acts of courage, and a clearly-defined right and wrong side, with no serious moral qualms or questions to distract. Verdict: *8 Seconds To Midnight* is a thriller packed with energy, action, and suspense, which consistently delivers on the promises of the genre.

**Publisher's Weekly/BookLife Review:** Well-developed main characters and plausible technical details help make a familiar plot fresh in Leifer's thriller. Fans of Tom Clancy and the TV series *24* will be riveted.

**BookLife Prize—2018 Semi-Finalist, score: 10/10.**

Leifer's novel stands out among others that address terrorist attempts to launch nuclear and biological attack weapons on the U.S. Intelligent discourse, verisimilitude, and a full humanization of characters provide the novel exceptional depth and dimension.

**Critical praise for *Terminal*:**

**Amanda Rofe, Readers' Favorite:** I was completely captivated with the story line from the very first chapter. John Leifer writes effortlessly and eloquently. *Terminal* contains all the components of a blockbuster movie. This is a well-researched book which held my attention throughout. I highly recommend it.

**4.6 Stars from IndieReader:** *Terminal*, John Leifer's page-turning prequel to his book "*8 Seconds to Midnight*" in the Commander John Hart series, proves that more than anything else, it's the power of the story, the plot line, that propels any decent military or government thriller. This one is supercharged and will grab readers by the throat, exhibiting the barely closeted global paranoia of modern times. There is no paranormal or horror story component, but this tale is unequivocally terrifying.

**Booklife Review:** Leifer (*The Myths of Modern Medicine*) makes his fiction debut with this suspenseful and alarming kickoff to a trilogy.

**Sinfully Wicked Book Reviews:** *Terminal*, by John Leifer, is a pulse pounding, edge of your seat terroristic thriller set against the backdrop of America and the Middle East. Leifer's writing is so rich you will get lost between the pages, hoping for the story to never end. I was completely drawn in from the first page, and I can truly say this is an outstanding and thought-provoking story. I have a feeling each new book in the series will be all five-star reads for me. Yes, it is that good!





**THOU SHALL  
~~NOT~~ KILL**

**JOHN LEIFER**



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Thou Shall Not Kill

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*Anybody who recognizes Israel will burn in the fire of the Islamic nation's fury.*

—MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD

*The Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would be infinitely more costly than any scenario you can imagine to stop it.*

—BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

*The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.*

—JOEL 3:16





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## LIST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Bashar Al-Assad:** Syrian president
- Asma al-Assad:** Wife of Bashar Al-Assad
- General Mohammad Ali Jafari:** Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard (IRGC)
- Hossein Taeb:** Iranian Shia cleric and Head of Intelligence, IRGC
- Major General Qasem Soleimani:** Leader of IRGC's Quds Force
- President Hassan Rouhani:** Iranian President
- Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:** Supreme Leader of Iran
- Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov:** Chief of the General Staff of Armed Forces of Russia
- General Alexander Zhuravlev:** Deputy Chief of General Staff and Commander of Russian Forces in Syria
- Marwan Issa:** Head of Hamas' military wing
- David Chaikin:** Director of Mossad
- Moshe Simon:** Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces
- Aaron Lerner:** Israeli Ambassador to the United States
- Yisrael Katz:** Israeli Intelligence Minister
- Lt. General Ali Abdulla Ayoub:** Syrian Minister of Defense

**Jonathan Conner:** U.S. President

**Brigadier General Gideon Mizrahi:** Commander of the  
IDF's West Bank Division

**Andrew Thomas:** U.S. Secretary of State

**Adam Herrington:** U.S. National Security Advisor

**Mark Oliver:** U.S. Secretary of Defense

**Joe Sanford:** Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

**General Chuck Rotel:** CENTCOM Commander

**Katherine Wolf:** Director, U.S. Central Intelligence  
Agency

**Marvin Kahn:** Deputy Director, U.S. Central Intelligence  
Agency

**Major General Amikam Norkin:** Commander of the  
Israeli Air Force (IAF)

**Colonel Levat:** Commander of the Ramat David Air Base

**Henry Sokolski:** Director of Nonproliferation Policy  
Education Center

**Eli Sharvit:** Commander in Chief of the Israeli Navy

**Maj. Gen. Tamir Heiman:** Head of IDF Military  
Intelligence Directorate

**Major General Nitzan Elon:** Commander of the Golani  
Brigade

**Captain Levi Arnot:** Helicopter Pilot

**Colonel Nobi Geller:** Commander of Operation Delilah

**Colonel Frank Holliday:** Cardiothoracic Surgeon



## INTRODUCTION

### *A Prodrome to War*

AFTER MORE THAN EIGHT YEARS of crippling civil war, the insurgency that had threatened the rule of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad was finally quelled. The tide had turned in favor of the ruling Alawite autocracy, thanks to the intervention of a united front of Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces known as the *Syrian Coalition*.

The Coalition crushed all remaining pockets of resistance with impunity. The cost in human lives was staggering: 500,000 Syrians were dead, 100,000 children orphaned, and more than 11 million civilians displaced. Major cities, such as Aleppo, lay in ruins. Billions of dollars would be required to restore even a modicum of civility to the devastated land. But rather than lay down their weapons and begin the arduous task of reconstruction, the Syrian Coalition turned its sights on Israel.

Impelled by a pernicious mix of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, the Coalition was committed to the total and complete destruction of the Jewish state. It was a horrific ambition, yet it would be only a stepping stone in the grand realignment of power across the Middle East.

With Iran leading the assault, the Coalition would not stop its march until Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States were under Shia rule.

If it was successful in achieving its vision, the Coalition would drive the United States out and supplant the Great Satan with Russia. Putin's geopolitical power would soar in direct proportion to his control over oil. U.S.-Russian doctrine would no longer rely on Mutually Assured Destruction to maintain the balance of power . . . not when the world's energy spigot was firmly in Russian hands. Now, Russian influence across the globe would be bought by the barrel.

The stage was set for catastrophic global conflict. All that was needed was a match to ignite the conflagration . . . a match the Iranians were hours away from striking.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *East of Tehran*

CLOAKED IN THE DARKNESS OF A MOONLESS NIGHT, the phantom-like G550 Gulfstream sat at the far end of Al-Dumayr Military Airport's single runway, forty kilometers northeast of Damascus, awaiting clearance from the tower.

The radio crackled as the tower communicated take-off instructions, which the pilot summarily acknowledged before throttling-up the twin Rolls Royce engines—each capable of producing more than 15,000 pounds of thrust. As he popped his foot off the brake, the plane lunged forward, pressing its lone passenger, Bashar al-Assad, hard against his seat. In less than a minute, the Syrian president was airborne and headed east.

Sixty seconds after departure, two MiG-29s from the 698 Squadron at Sayqal appeared off the Gulfstream's wingtips. The pride of the Syrian Air Force, their job was to ensure the president's safe passage to Tehran. Comforted by the presence of his formidable escort, Assad leaned back in the spacious black leather chair

and closed his eyes. His mind turned to the meeting ahead and its immeasurable importance to the stability of his regime.

He whispered a prayer under his breath—a prayer for a unifying vision that would forever cement the Coalition. It was not merely his life that he sought to protect, but that of his wife, Asma, and their three children. He had no prayers, however, for the people of Syria who had turned against his regime—only contempt.

Bashar al-Assad's life was a far cry from what he had once envisioned. Though he grew up under the watchful eye of his dictatorial father, Hafez, Bashar never planned to follow in his footsteps. The soft-spoken and reserved second son was grateful that succession had been delegated to his older brother, Bassel.

The charismatic and athletic Bassel was well-suited for the task. He was impetuous and hot-tempered, having been compared to Sonny in *The Godfather* by the head of the CIA. It was these characteristics that helped Hafaz's older son rise quickly through the ranks of the Syrian Arab National Guard and become a unit Commander of its 12th Armored Battalion.

Meanwhile, relieved not to be burdened with such awesome responsibility, Bashar pursued a career in healing. He graduated from medical school at Damascus University in 1988 and then spent four years working as an army doctor before returning to London's Western Eye Institute for post-graduate work in ophthalmology. While he was in London, he met his future wife.

For Bashar al-Assad, life could not have been better in the early 1990s. There appeared to be a clear and predictable

trajectory to his life . . . something in which he took great comfort . . . until a foggy day in 1994 changed everything in an instant.

In the early morning of January 21, 1994, Bassel was running late to catch a flight to Germany. Relegating his chauffeur to the backseat, he commandeered the Mercedes, then sped off towards Damascus International Airport. A heavy fog permeated the route, and despite the protestations of his chauffeur, Bassel refused to slow down.

A few miles shy of the airport, hidden in the mist, was a concrete roundabout. By the time Bassel saw it, it was too late to course correct. He plowed directly into the structure and died instantly. His chauffeur, protected by a seatbelt, walked away from the crash unscathed.

That singular event irreparably altered the course of Bashar's life.

Overwhelmed with grief and with no heir apparent, Hafez summoned his younger son back to Damascus. Within a few months, Bashar was named the new successor to the throne. He would spend the next six years preparing to assume the reins of power under his father's tutelage.

When his father died in 2000, Bashar was anointed president. Shortly thereafter, he married Asma.

The new Syrian leader would prove worthy of his family's adopted name—*Al Assad*, "the lion," but he would also embody the spirit of his family's original name—*Wahsh*, "savage." Many years after earning his medical degree, his professors and colleagues would marvel at how Bashar al-Assad could have taken an oath to do no harm and then commit untold atrocities.

Over time, Asma would be seen to embody a similar contradiction. The daughter of a London cardiologist and a working mother who had served as the former First Secretary of London's Syrian Embassy, Asma was welcomed with open arms and became known as the "Rose in the Desert."

That moniker proved short-lived as Asma became increasingly viewed as complicit in her husband's atrocities. While barrel bombs spewed chlorine and other toxic gases designed to choke the life out of innocent women and children, an impeccably dressed Asma smiled at the crowds while walking her children to Montessori school. The "Desert Rose" soon became known as the "First Lady of Hell."

The cockpit door swung open with a creak, summoning Bashar al-Assad back to the moment. An hour and fifty-two minutes had elapsed since take-off.

"Mr. President, we are on final approach to Doshan-Tappeh Air Base. We will have you on the ground in ten minutes, Sir," the captain informed him.

Assad bobbed his head in acknowledgment. The captain saluted—a vestige of his military training—then returned to his post. Soon the outskirts of Iran's most populous city appeared on the horizon.

Located just east of central Tehran, Doshan-Tappeh had long served as headquarters for the Iranian Air Force, an atrophied branch of the military that had been in a continual state of decline since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Yet the base retained its vitality due to one simple fact: it served as the headquarters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps known as

the IRGC. As such, it housed the IRGC's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Directorate of Operations, and Directorate of Intelligence.

The IRGC was created by Ayatollah Khomeini following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and had been given the charge of "protecting the revolution and its achievements." It was designed to serve the theocracy much as the medieval crusades served the Catholic Church. It reported directly to the Ayatollah, if it reported to anyone at all.

As he stepped onto the tarmac, Assad was greeted by General Mohammad Ali Jafari, chief of the IRGC. Based upon his graying beard and hair, Assad judged him to be in his late fifties, though his body did little to betray his age. The General appeared taut and formidable under his perfectly pressed uniform.

Jafari had commanded the IRGC for more than a decade. He was committed not only to the Ayatollah's grand vision of Shia domination, but also to the destruction of Israel and its principal ally, the United States. Unafraid of condemnation, he had been a vociferous opponent of the nuclear negotiations with then Secretary of State, John Kerry. In fact, he'd gone so far as to share his dream of directly engaging America in war.

"Welcome to Iran, Mr. President," Jafari saluted his ally. "We've been looking forward to your arrival."

"Thank you, General. I have looked forward to this day for many months."

The two men climbed into the back of a black Mercedes limo and were shuttled to a building several blocks away. As he climbed out of the car, Assad saw what appeared to

be more of a bunker than a building. Two sentries armed with Uzis stood guard.

“I see your men carry Uzis.”

“Our hatred of the Jews does not render our judgment blind. Few weapons have the reliability and killing power of an Uzi. Would you rather they carry AKs?” This elicited a hearty laugh from both men.

After entering the building, they descended four steep stairways in succession, which ultimately deposited them in the heart of a massive underground complex.

“I’m sorry there’s no elevator, Mr. President. If we were attacked, that’s the last place you’d want to be. Our conference room is located beneath forty feet of reinforced concrete, making it impervious to the bombs and missiles of our adversaries,” Jafari explained.

“You’re sure of that?” Al-Assad questioned.

“We’ve learned not to under-estimate the Israelis. Their ground-penetrating warheads can’t reach this deep . . . not unless they carry a nuclear payload. You couldn’t be safer anywhere, President Assad.”

Assad paused, putting his hand on the general’s shoulder. “Considering the roster of guests you’ve assembled, I don’t think any level of precaution should be considered superfluous.”

When they reached the conference room, the general gave a perfunctory knock before opening the massive wooden door and allowing President Assad to precede him. Assad quickly sized up the members of the Syrian Coalition, who were intently awaiting his arrival.

One side of the table was dominated by the Iranians, who were seated in order of ascending power. The first in line was Hossein Taeb, an Iranian Shia cleric and head of

Intelligence for the IRGC. Next to him was Major General Qasem Soleimani, leader of the IRGC's Quds Force, a position he had held since 1998.

Soleimani needed no introduction. His ascendancy to power had begun with the pivotal role he played in the slaughter of American troops in Iraq. According to the late U.S. Senator, John McCain, Soleimani was responsible for a dramatic increase in the number of American injuries and fatalities. Under his direction, Iran had armed America's enemies with a new and vastly improved IED, causing the then head of U.S. forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, to describe his nemesis as "truly evil."

Soleimani was smart, strategic, and ruthless. He was recognized by many as the single most powerful operative in the Middle East. During his tenure, Soleimani had fostered the growth of relationships with pivotal terrorist groups—most importantly, Hezbollah. These proxies enabled him to stage a slow war of attrition against Israel without directly committing Iranian lives.

The meeting was to be Soleimani's show, but first, decorum demanded that appropriate homage be paid to the two leaders of Iran.

President Hassan Rouhani greeted Assad with a smile and firm handshake, followed by the true Iranian commander, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the power structure of Iran had been turned upside down. Whereas the Shah had attempted to maintain the illusion of a democratic state, there was no such pretense under the absolute rule of the Ayatollah. He controlled the military and all things political, as well as social norms. Though

Iran boasted of a president who was second in power, in reality the presidency was in name only with little actual authority.

However, even the theocracy understood the need for checks and balances, which is why they established the Assembly of Experts for the Leadership—a constitutional body of eighty-six scholars of Islamic law who were empowered to appoint or dismiss the Supreme Leader. Though they were vested with such authority, it had never been exercised, as demonstrated by the fact that only two Supreme Leaders had ruled Iran since the revolution.

Seated directly across from the Ayatollah was the Russian delegation, including General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, and General Alexander Zhuravlev, Deputy Chief of General Staff and commander of Russian forces in Syria.

Gerasimov had begun his military service in 1976, much of which consisted of serving in and leading various mechanized units within the former Soviet Union. He had developed a reputation as a superb strategist capable of integrating a multitude of disciplines under a unitary plan for the destruction of his enemies.

By contrast, Alexander Zhuravlev was more comfortable executing strategy on the battlefield than developing it at headquarters. Zhuravlev was the recipient of the Hero of the Russian Federation—an award bestowed by President Putin.

Sensing the group's eagerness to get down to business, Assad quickly greeted all of the attendees by name before taking his seat.

The Ayatollah opened the meeting with a prayer in which he asked for God's hand in helping to vanquish the

unholy scourge of Israel. When he was finished with his invective, Ayatollah Khamenei relinquished control to General Soleimani.

“Gentlemen, since the earliest days of the revolution, our hearts have been centered on the destruction of Israel. We have bided our time and waited for a moment free from distractions to execute a lethal blow to the Zionist regime. The time to strike has finally arrived.” He paused to maximize the effect of his words.

“Hostilities across Syria have all but ceased, due in no small measure to the intervention of our Russian collaborators. The once formidable ISIS has been routed from its last remaining positions, and the United States has withdrawn in defeat. We are no longer relegated to playing defense. We can now mount a major offensive—striking without fear of reprisal, thanks to both the forces that we have amassed along Israel’s borders, as well as the massive arsenal of missiles now targeted at the Jews.

“I have spent many hours speaking with each of you as I sought to construct a plan that would engender your unanimous support. We are assembled today to review that plan.” Soleimani picked up a three-ring binder and opened it to the title page:

### The Twelfth Imam

It was a reference to Muhammad al-Hasan al-Askari, a figure recognized by most Shia as the presumed Mahdi or Messiah of Islam. According to religious texts, he would return from occultation (a place of hiding) to restore peace and justice in the days preceding the final judgment.

“The plan is contained in your briefing books. Once I walk through its most salient elements, I am confident you will agree that it is the fastest path to eliminating the scourge of Israel.”



## CHAPTER TWO

### *Hallah, Haifa Oranges, and a Cup of Bitter Coffee*

RACHEL RABINOVICH WAS MORE THAN A MATCH for her strong-willed husband. Spirited, smart, and outspoken, she kept Avi on his toes. The couple had been married for more than twenty-five years. Rachel had met Abraham while she was working in an investment banking firm in Jerusalem.

“Where’s my coffee?” the sluggish prime minister growled as he emerged from the bedroom in his heavy, brown robe and shuffled towards the breakfast table. His unkempt hair caused Rachel to chuckle.

“It’s in the pot,” she replied, “and while you’re at it, you can pour me a cup.”

Rabinovich grunted something inaudible before doing precisely as his wife instructed. Outside of their home, he was the formidable head of the Likud Party and prime minister of Israel. But within the confines of their adobe walls, Rachel ruled.

It had taken three marriages for Avi to finally get the rules straight, though he still veered into dangerous territory at times—including a very public affair with a member of

his staff. Rachel had managed to forgive him, despite the humiliation and profound sense of betrayal she had felt at the time.

"I've toasted some hallah, and there's a bowl of oranges and grapes on the table. I've got an appointment with Dr. Eiseman in twenty minutes. Not all of us enjoy a life of leisure."

"It's going to be a slow day at the office," Avi said as he sipped on the steaming cup of dark, bitter coffee. "I don't have any appointments until ten o'clock. Why rush?"

"You never know what awaits you, my dear."

"Don't tempt fate, Rachel! Poo, poo, poo," he uttered quickly. It was an old Yiddish expression used to ward off evil spirits. "I'm learning to enjoy the calmer moments of existence."

"You know they are temporary, Avi . . . the proverbial calm before the storm."

"Who's to say we can't have enduring peace?" he responded.

"Mr. Prime Minister, how many countries are bent on our destruction?"

"I've lost count . . . but fortunately, only a handful possess the capacity to make good on the threat. My job is to ensure that it never happens."

"Then maybe you should get to work!"

She kissed the top of his head, grabbed her coffee cup, and headed for the door. "I'll see you this evening . . . we're having the Davidsons over for dinner . . . you did remember?"

"Who are the Davidsons?" he said to raise her ire.

"You really are something, Mr. Prime Minister. Harry Davidson is among your top five American donors. He's

been loyal to you for many years. His wife, Robin, is delightful and beautiful . . . and don't tell me you haven't noticed."

"I haven't! And Rachel, I can recite Harry's complete bio, if it would make you happy."

"No need . . . I'm leaving." She smiled, turned, and walked to the door.

"Why are you going to see Eiseman?" Avi asked before Rachel crossed the threshold.

"I found a small lump in my breast last night while I was in the shower."

"What do you mean by 'a small lump?'"

"Nothing to worry about," she said, more to reassure herself than her husband.

The door closed before Avi could utter another word. Surely it was nothing, he told himself, anxious at the thought of losing what was most precious in his life.

Despite his superlative intelligence, it had taken nearly fifty years of hard living for Rabinovich to grasp what it meant to love someone. Though he had early on developed a keen appreciation for lust and personal gratification, the notions of selflessness, loyalty, and sacrifice had evaded his consciousness until he met Rachel, and he wasn't about to lose her.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Lessons Written in the Sand*

“THE METHOD FOR DEFEATING THE JEWISH STATE is written in its history,” Soleimani began his address to the assembled leaders of the Coalition. “The Israel Defense Forces has proven its ability to respond astutely to conventional attacks, but it is less dexterous at managing asymmetrical threats.”

“What renders a force as formidable as the IDF impotent in the face of an insurrection?” the Ayatollah asked.

“Two things: First, they fear being branded as brutal in their suppression of ‘terrorist threats’ emanating from within Gaza, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon. And with good reason—we’ve succeeded in painting the Israelis as heartless war criminals who respond to bricks with bullets and Molotov cocktails with mortars.

“Second, though they possess an extensive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, they are fearful of ever unleashing such devastation. If they were truly strong, the IDF would crush its enemies with little concern over so-called collateral damage. But the Jewish ethos won’t let them. And that will be a critical element in their defeat.”

“Are you suggesting that insurgencies can topple the State of Israel?” the Ayatollah asked incredulously.

“No, but they will play a critical role in Israel’s destruction. As you know, the Jews have won battles when they have been attacked on a single front by a single adversary. It has happened time and time again. However, with the notable exception of the Six-Day War, Israel has failed to demonstrate an ability to survive simultaneous attacks using a combination of conventional and asymmetrical attacks against geographically diverse targets.”

“Do you agree with this assessment, General Gerasimov?” the Ayatollah asked.

“Completely.” Gerasimov responded without hesitation, his words overlaid with a thick Slavic accent.

With an upward flick of his wrist, the Ayatollah gestured for Soleimani to continue.

“Our success will be contingent upon overwhelming the IDF. That means we must move with sufficient speed to negate their ability to deploy reserve forces in time to stop our incursion.”

Assad was quick to jump in. “That sounds good in theory, General Soleimani, but should it fail, there are many miles that separate your land from that of the Jews. My country shares a border with them. Damascus is mere minutes from Israeli airbases. In a single day, they can cripple our nation and destroy whatever gains we made fighting a protracted civil war.”

“No war is without great risk, President Assad. But I would think that the prospect of eradicating such a reviled adversary would overcome your trepidation.”

“My trepidation can only be overcome with logic, General. So tell me the details of your plan, and I will tell you whether I think it can succeed.”

“Our plan begins with a diversion. We turn up the heat in Gaza.”

“You presume that Hamas will align with your strategy,” Assad countered.

“I presume nothing, President Assad. I have spoken with Marwan Issa, who has agreed to a two-fold plan beginning with the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade infiltrating the Israeli border using their tunnel network.”

*Qassam*, the colloquial name for the brigade, was the military branch of Palestinian Hamas. Marwan Issa was the most recent successor to a long string of commanders, most of whom had succumbed to Israeli assassination. The organization, which was named for a rabid anti-Zionist, was created in 1991 and served as a constant thorn in the side of Israel.

“How do you plan to infiltrate tunnels that were destroyed by Israel in 2014?” Assad asked derisively.

“The IDF destroyed thirty-two operating tunnels in 2014. By 2018, thanks to more than a thousand laborers, there were forty new tunnels running under the border. May I continue?”

Assad nodded grudgingly.

“Hamas will send more than a dozen suicide bombers to neighboring towns, including Sderot, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Beersheba. Shortly before nine a.m. on May 15, they will travel from their safe houses to key strategic locations. The targets have been selected based upon their population density, and hence the ability to maximize casualties.

“At nine o’clock, the Shaheed—the martyrs—will detonate their explosive vests.”

The significance of the date was not lost on anyone in the room. May 15, known as *Nakba*, followed on the heels of Israeli Independence Day and marked the date when Palestinians were exiled from their homes in 1948.

“ Hamas will wait ten minutes for the Israeli Home Front Command to deploy emergency workers before launching the first fusillade of Grad Katyusha rockets targeted at these towns. We are confident that the ensuing terror and chaos will be sufficient to captivate the attention of the IDF and Home Front Defense for some time.”

“ That will put the Gaza squarely in the cross-hairs of the IDF and IAF,” Assad protested with impatience.

“ That is precisely our intent, Mr. President. Because your ground forces, working hand in hand with our military leaders, will begin an artillery assault on the Golan Heights in synchrony with the Gaza attack. If things go as planned, we will capture the Golan within twenty-four to thirty-six hours.”

The Golan Heights was a 690-square-mile swath of land bordered on the south by the Yarmouk River and on the north by Mount Hermon. Part of the land seized from Syria by Israel following the 1967 war, the Golan held significant strategic importance. From its elevated positions, the Coalition could shell vast portions of Israel, endangering the lives of civilian and military personnel.

“ We’ve attempted to repatriate the Golan before unsuccessfully!” Assad referred to a 1973 attack on entrenched Israeli forces that resulted in significant deaths on both sides.

“ This time we will be the overwhelming force, President Assad. There are approximately 10,000 Quds forces awaiting deployment. Hezbollah troops in Syria add another 5,000.

If we assume that Syria will contribute upwards of 10,000 troops, then we have an invading force of 25,000. That's surely enough to overwhelm the IDF—if we strike rapidly, before reserve troops can reach the Golan.”

But Assad wasn't convinced. “The Israelis are entrenched in highly defensible positions. Plus, despite your claims to the contrary, General, there are still pockets of resistance—mainly ISIS—that remain on our side of the Golan. Sheer numbers will not be the sole determinant of such a battle. The Coalition stands to lose thousands of warriors.”

“That's why the attack will begin with an artillery bombardment,” Soleimani said in acknowledgement. “We will pound their positions relentlessly to pre-condition the area for a ground assault.”

“And what about the IAF, and their ability to knock out our artillery with little effort?” Assad demanded. His forces had endured significant losses at the hands of the Israeli Air Force in numerous skirmishes throughout the civil war.

“Why do you think we provided you with the S400, President Assad?” Gerasimov interjected, clearly tiring of the president's whining.

The S400 was the pinnacle in Russian air defense systems. It was able to engage a full range of airborne threats—from drones to aircraft to incoming missiles—at a range of up to 400 kilometers. It was fast, accurate, and deadly.

“Tell me, General, how effective will the S400 be in engaging Israel's new stealth F35I? Or perhaps you think we should not be concerned about a plane that can fly at Mach 1.6, pull 9 Gs, and carry 4,000 pounds of smart weapons?”

“Israel has taken delivery of only a handful of the fancy new fighter jets. And, yes, President Assad, they may

penetrate your air defenses. But the workhorse of IAF, the F16, will be blown out of the sky. As soon as four or five of their planes are shot down, the counter-attack will be called off and the planes will be ordered back to base until a new strategy can be developed.”

“You are willing to wager a great deal based upon your beliefs about the S400’s capabilities, but you are gambling with our assets,” Assad said pointedly at Gerasimov.

“Have faith, President Assad. Our system will perform exactly as promised.”

“The S400 did not stop the Americans and their NATO allies from destroying our chemical research facility!” an angry Assad shouted.

“That is because we turned it off before their jets and cruise missiles arrived,” Gerasimov responded.

“You what?” Assad bellowed incredulously as he leapt to his feet.

“Sit down, Mr. Assad,” the Ayatollah intoned harshly.

“You heard me correctly, President Assad. We allowed them through in a brokered arrangement to de-escalate tensions with the Americans. Had we not, your treasured palace was next on their list of targets,” Gerasimov explained.

“May I continue?” Soleimani asked the group. The Ayatollah gestured to move on.

“After twelve continuous hours of artillery strikes, the bombardment will cease and rapid troop deployment will begin. The first troops to assault the Golan will be Iranian Special Forces, who, like their Hamas brethren in Gaza, will utilize a vast network of tunnels to approach Israeli defensive positions. Behind them will be the wave of 25,000 men. We will rout the Israelis in hours, driving them back to the Jordan River.”

The Ayatollah closed his eyes and nodded his head in support, as if witnessing the annihilation of his foe.

The general continued, “But our objective is far greater than the repatriation of a strip of land. Our goal is to bring Israel to its knees, which is why we have an additional 10,000 Hezbollah troops manning missile batteries in southern Lebanon and awaiting our orders. As you know, despite Israel’s interception of numerous weapons convoys from Damascus to Lebanon, many still reached their intended targets. There is not a single hectare of land within Israel that is beyond the reach of Hezbollah’s missiles.”

Sensing a need to stroke Assad’s fragile ego, Soleimani continued. “Thanks to our joint efforts with President Assad, we’ve expanded Hezbollah’s cache of missiles quantitatively and qualitatively. There are now more than 120,000 missiles under our control in Lebanon, including approximately 400 SCUD-D missiles. Though its numbers are small when compared to the thousands of short and medium range missiles ready for deployment, the SCUD-D brings a new level of threat to Israel. Thanks to a 700-kilometer range, we can target Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem with unparalleled precision and deliver a payload in excess of 500 kilograms.”

“The Israelis have dealt with missile barrages for years, Alexander Zhuravlev instructed Soleimani. “Other than being able to more accurately target, tell us why this attack will be different.”

“At the outset this will appear to be yet another skirmish in the long war of attrition.”

“What do you mean by *at the outset*?” Assad asked.

“In the beginning phase of the assault, the missiles will be loaded with conventional warheads—everything from short range Katyushas and Fajr-5s to long-range Zelzal-2s will be deployed. Our primary goal is not to kill thousands of Israelis, though that would be a welcome result, but rather to engage Israeli missile defense batteries so that they expend many of their surface-to-air missiles. If sufficiently depleted, any system, including their three missile defense systems—The Iron Dome, David’s Sling, and Arrow—will be rendered ineffective in their ability to stop incoming threats. That’s when we fire our final volley of SCUD-Ds.”

“And what is so special about this final round of missiles?” Assad pressed.

“There are twelve SCUD-D missiles, four each for Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa. We will use Tel Aviv as a ‘demonstration site’—a preview of the destruction that will follow if the IDF fails to lay down its weapons.”

Soleimani continued, “The missiles targeted at Tel Aviv are armed with chemical munitions. The warheads contain a nose-mounted, high-explosive charge designed to split open the warhead and aerosolize its contents—a Novichok agent. As you know, not only is this an extraordinarily lethal chemical, but a persistent one.”

“I also know that it carries the unmistakable signature of Russia. General Gerasimov, I’m surprised at your country’s willingness to be so openly complicit in the use of weapons of mass destruction,” Assad remarked.

“How is it any different than the Americans turning a blind eye to Israel’s nuclear ambiguity? Is that not facilitating the eventual use of weapons of mass destruction?”

Besides, it is a moot point. Although it will be immediately apparent that a nerve agent has been deployed, it will take several days for forensic confirmation that it was a Novichok agent versus VX or Sarin. By then, the war will be over.”

Zhuravlev continued, “I would be less concerned about the identity of the supplier of death than I would Israel’s ability to defend itself. The Israelis have anticipated such attacks for years. Their Homeland Defense has dramatically increased the number of shelters, ensured that all residents have gas masks, and proven they can shield eighty percent of the population in key cities in less than seven minutes.”

Soleimani countered, “We agree that the number of fatalities may be limited, but there will be no limit to the terror inflicted. There are risks, however, beginning with a pre-emptive strike on SCUD locations in Lebanon.”

“Are they not hidden?” the Ayatollah asked.

“Because of the SCUD’s length, we have limited ability to camouflage the missiles. Israel probably has satellite surveillance of their positions. It takes forty-five minutes to fuel a SCUD prior to launch. If the IDF views such activities, they may pre-emptively strike. Since the missiles are geographically dispersed, that would require multiple sorties or precisely guided munitions. We assume they will be too distracted by our attacks on other fronts to carry out such missions.”

Zhuravlev turned to his superior for permission to speak frankly, which Gerasimov granted with an almost imperceptible nod of the head.

“Our intelligence estimates indicate that Israel has between 150 and 400 nuclear weapons ready for deployment.

‘Jewish ethos’ aside, they will not sit idly by while the country faces an existential threat. They will reach a tipping point, at which time the Israeli government will sanction the limited use of their nuclear arsenal. As you know, Israel’s foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, went on record stating that the use of chemical weapons by Hezbollah would be a ‘casus belli,’ ensuring that Israel would respond without hesitation or restraint.”

Soleimani confidently refuted Zhuravlev’s comment. “That decision will not be reached lightly. It will take the Israelis time to argue the appropriateness of nuclear reprisal. That is why we plan an abrupt cessation in our aggression following the capture of the Golan, the chemical attack on Tel Aviv, and the uprising in Gaza. We will pause long enough to issue an ultimatum in which we demand the capitulation of the Israeli government, while ensuring the safety of its people. The Israelis will have forty-eight hours or face annihilation.”

“What makes you so arrogant as to believe the Israelis will surrender?” Gerasimov snapped at Soleimani. “I think you have seriously under-estimated the resolve of our shared foe. The Jews have a 2,000-year history of oppression. An attack on the Golan, a few thousand lives lost in Tel Aviv pale by comparison to wandering for forty years in the wilderness or being nearly extinguished in the ovens of Nazi concentration camps.”

“They will have no choice with a nuclear Sword of Damocles dangling above their heads,” Soleimani responded.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Cabin Conversations*

THERE ARE CERTAIN JOBS that are best relegated to chronic pessimists, including the job of prime minister of Israel. What had started out as a beautiful spring day for Avi Rabinovich was turning ugly fast.

Six hours after the Syrian Coalition concluded its proceedings at Doshan-Tappeh, Rabinovich convened an emergency meeting of the Israeli Security Cabinet at the Bor, a massive subterranean complex located beneath the Defense Ministry in the Hakiryia district of Tel Aviv. The facility was designed to protect its occupants against chemical, biological, and nuclear attacks. Access required first passing through massive steel doors that hermetically sealed, then descending fifty feet to the Chief of Staff's conference room.

The conference room was stark and modernistic, containing an oval beveled-edge wooden table that seated twenty and a vast array of flat-panel monitors of varying sizes. The only décor in the room was two large Israeli flags flanking the entrance.

Summoned at a moment's notice, only the most critical members of the Security Cabinet were physically present,

including David Chaikin, Director of Mossad, and Moshe Simon, Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces. Aaron Lerner, Israel's Ambassador to the United States, and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz, participated via secure videoconference.

"It appears that our *friends*, the so-called 'Syrian Coalition,' may be preparing to embark on a more ambitious mission than quelling Syria's insurgency," Rabinovich began.

With the press of a button, video screens across the expansive conference room came to life, each with the razor-sharp image that only a drone could have captured.

"These images are from Doshan-Tappeh airbase near Tehran. As you can see from the time and date stamp, the most recent ones are from this morning," Rabinovich explained.

Bashar al-Assad could be easily identified as he descended the stairs of his private jet, as could the man greeting him—General Jafari. The show continued with images of General Soleimani, followed by Iranian president Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, all entering the same bunker-like building.

Rabinovich paused, although he had not reached the end of his photo album. Staring into the eyes of his most trusted advisors, he called up the remaining two images. There was a collective groan as photographs of Gerasimov and Zhuralev appeared.

"They must have had a hell of a party," Rabinovich's words were laced with his trademark sarcasm.

"As you can see, the surveillance photos show a virtually who's who of anti-Zionists meeting outside of Tehran."

Moshe shrugged his shoulders at the revelation. “There have been numerous meetings between the Syrians, Iranians, and Russians since the formation of the Syrian Coalition. What about this one has you so concerned, Avi?”

“What has me so concerned? What has me so concerned?” he repeated the question, his voice raising a full octave. “Are you serious, Moshe? Have we ever witnessed such a cast of characters assembled in one place?”

Pausing momentarily, he added, “Don’t you think that’s a hell of a risk for them to take? They must have had a damn good reason for it.”

“I’ll grant you, Avi, it is an unusual collection of individuals, but it may have nothing to do with Israel. For all we know, it is a summit to discuss the post-civil war plan for governing Syria—including how Iran and Russia will be repaid for ensuring the survival of the Assad regime,” Moshe Simon speculated.

Simon was a seasoned warrior. The son of a copper miner from Tiberias, Simon enlisted in the Golani Brigade, one of Israel’s most decorated infantry units, in 1978. An unintended lifer in the army, he spent thirty-three years ascending the ranks before eventually being promoted to head Israel’s defense forces.

Though level-headed and even-handed, the general was not without controversy. Simon was credited with authoring the *Dabiya Doctrine*—whereby Israel would use disproportionate force, as necessary, to dislodge embedded terrorists, irrespective of whether they were surrounded by civilian towns or encamped at military installations.

“Moshe, based upon the evidence presented thus far, I understand a modicum of skepticism. But listen to what David has to say. Only then, form your final judgment.”

Rabinovich turned to the head of Mossad. “Enlighten us, David.”

“Gentlemen, as you know, one of our most valuable assets serves as President Assad’s personal flight attendant. She was aboard the flight that ferried Mr. Assad to the meeting at Doshan-Tappeh, as well as the return trip to Damascus. I had a chance to debrief her less than an hour ago by sat phone.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense, David,” Rabinovich chided him. “Share with us what you learned.”

“She indicated that the president appeared contemplative prior to the meeting. Afterwards, however, his mood was buoyant.”

Speaking via teleconference, Yisrael Katz asked his direct report, “So we presume he got something he wanted . . . is that what you are implying, Ari?”

“Yes, Sir. We know that he made two calls en route to Damascus. Our operative believes that the first call was to Lt. General Ali Abdulla Ayoub, the Syrian Minister of Defense. The second call was to his wife, Asma al-Assad.”

“And?” Yisrael asked impatiently.

“According to our operative, he told General Ayoub that he was confident that the destruction of Israel was finally at hand.”

“And did she overhear his comments to his wife?” Yisrael persisted.

“Yes . . . he said, ‘It’s almost over.’”

A collective sigh, not of relief but anxiety, was shared by the participants. Rabinovich leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“I don’t believe there’s much room for interpretation. We knew this day would likely arrive; we just didn’t know how

soon. The warning claxon has sounded, but the question remains as to how we should respond.”

“Respond to what?” Simon posited. “We have no idea what they are planning. It’s hard to develop a plan of attack or counter-attack when you don’t know who, what, where, or when. We can surmise why.”

“So we wait for an overwhelming force to attack our country? Is that what you are suggesting?” Rabinovich responded.

“If I may, Sir?” The voice coming through a speaker belonged to Aaron Lerner.

“Of course. Talk to us, Mr. Ambassador.”

Lerner had grown up in Miami, Florida. He had attended the Wharton School as an undergraduate before completing his Ph.D. at Oxford. Aaron Lerner rarely sounded the alarm, although, as Israeli’s ambassador to the United States, he was often embroiled in threatening situations.

“I believe we should request an emergency briefing with President Conner. We need an immediate and potent counter-balance to the Russians, which requires U.S. involvement. The U.S. can work behind the scenes to galvanize sentiment among the Saudis, Jordanians, and other countries with a vested interest in stopping any further incursion into the region by the Syrian Coalition.”

Rabinovich sat silently for a moment before responding. He looked around the table and to the videoconferencing monitors for agreement. All heads nodded.

“You have an excellent relationship with President Conner. Request the meeting on my behalf,” Rabinovich advised him. “Good luck.” Rabinovich terminated the video uplink.

Simon wasn't finished. "Despite my prior comments, I suggest we not wait for the Americans before making preparations. When we await their permission, bad things seem to happen. At the very least, we should notify Home Front Command immediately. With the Council's approval, I will speak to Brigadier General Gideon Mizrahi regarding raising our state of alert."

"Permission granted, but surely there is more that we can do than wait for bombs or missiles to rain down on our countrymen. Why else did we spend time modeling every conceivable scenario for an attack on our homeland if not to respond?" Rabinovich demanded.

The statement was rhetorical, but not the question. "Tell me, General, what do you believe is most likely to occur?"

"As you indicated, Mr. Prime Minister, there are many scenarios . . ."

"Put yourself in their shoes, Moshe. If you were commanding a combined force of Iranian, Syrian, and Russian assets, where would you hit us first?"

"Bassar Al-Assad has witnessed our resolve in battle and may be leery about risking further depletion of his military after losing so many soldiers in the civil war. His Air Force would be no match for the IAF . . . which is vastly superior in its technology and training. The Iranians, in tandem with the Russians, are the likely architects of the battle plan. They have been building up their missile stockpiles, while greatly improving the accuracy and payload of these weapons. They can hit us anywhere with conventional or unconventional weapons, all without risking any troop loss."

"So that's where you would place your money?"

“I would hedge my bet, Mr. Prime Minister. There’s an alternate scenario that could be equally if not more devastating. They could attack our north from southern Lebanon using Hezbollah forces, strike the Golan Heights to our northeast, and then foment additional chaos by having Hamas rise up in the Gaza. As a coalition, they have the troops and the embedded missile and artillery positions to do a tremendous amount of damage in a short time.”

“How do we stop them?” Rabinovich asked.

“In the first scenario, we rely on our integrated missile defense, while preparing for an air assault on critical Iranian and Syrian targets. We would face numerous challenges—beginning with the Russian S400 air defense in Syria. In Iran, we face a different challenge. We can overcome their air defense, but many of our targets are hidden amidst subterranean bunkers spread across thousands of square miles. In short, it will be hell trying to stop them. And I haven’t even gotten to Hezbollah, who has an estimated 120,000 missiles aimed at us right now.

“There are, of course, limitations to the effectiveness of those weapon. Most of them can be defeated with our missile defenses, but some will still get through. As for the Golan—it’s vulnerable. We can shore up our positions, particularly if we see troop movement in Syria. With appropriate IAF support, our position should hold.”

“What about the Gaza?”

“We can crush any insurrection, but it will be impossible to contain collateral damage. The civilian casualties will be high, and the world’s attention will be focused on us.”

“You haven’t mentioned the West Bank, which provides unimpeded access to our coastal plane and the majority of our population, not to mention its vital role in our economy.”

“I don’t see it as a threat. Despite recent condemnations from Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian National Authority remains convinced that a peaceful solution is the only sustainable course of action. There may be pockets of Hamas insurgents lodged within the West Bank, but their numbers remain small. Furthermore, there’s no threat of an invasion from the east—as long as our peace with Jordan holds. That’s why I don’t consider the West Bank to be a viable launching pad for an assault on Israel, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“David, you’ve not spoken a word about our response to your intelligence.”

“Sometimes it is better to listen, Mr. Prime Minister. I do, however, have an opinion. I believe that the combined Iranian, Hezbollah, Hamas, Syrian, and Russian forces represent a level of threat that may overwhelm our ability to defend our nation. Before that can happen, we must be willing to consider the deployment of unconventional assets.”

“I should have allowed you to remain mute,” Rabinovich mused, not ready to consider the use of *unconventional assets*—Israel’s nuclear option.

The prime minister realized that the discussion was only going to escalate in intensity and called for a break. They would reassemble in twenty minutes. He walked briskly out of the conference room towards his office. Rachel’s earlier comments about her health were weighing heavily on his mind. The minute he was alone, he called her.

"I'm sorry I was so difficult this morning, Rachel."

"Why should today be different than any other day, Avi? You were just being you."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not a better me . . . particularly when I now know that something was troubling you. Tell me what Dr. Eiseman said."

"He said I appear to have a 2-centimeter lesion in my right breast. He won't know what it is until they biopsy it, but he's concerned it may be cancer. I should have had surgery the minute I learned I was BRCA positive."

"We discussed the matter at length, and you opted to take a chance. Don't second guess the wisdom of your decision—that's a sure way to make yourself feel miserable. When is the biopsy scheduled for?"

"Three days from now . . . that's the soonest they could work me in."

"I'll see about that!"

"No, Avi. Don't pull strings. I can wait a few days . . . my condition won't change. Regardless of what they find, I want to reconsider surgery. I don't want to play the waiting game any longer."

"Of course, you have my complete support."

"We can talk more about it tonight."

"I'm sorry, I know the timing is terrible, but I won't be coming home for dinner. In fact, I'm not sure when I'll be home. Things are heating up once again, and my colleagues at the Bor are greatly concerned. Forgive me, Rachel."

She laughed, "If I can forgive you for your surly attitude, surely I can forgive you for doing your duty. Check in on me when you can?"

“Without fail, Darling.”

As he hung up the phone, Rabinovich felt as if a tectonic shift was occurring in the very bedrock of his life. Rachel, his one love, and Israel, his other, were suddenly facing potent foes. The stakes had never been higher.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### *A Pledge of Allegiance*

ENSCONCED IN A SECURE FACILITY, Aaron Lerner picked up the encrypted phone that provided direct access to U.S. Secretary of State Andrew Thomas. Once Thomas was on the line, Lerner began to recount just enough details from the earlier briefing to convey the urgency of the matter. He requested an emergency meeting between U.S. and Israeli officials.

“You know, Aaron, there are other viable explanations,” Thomas advised the ambassador, who had become a close friend through the years.

“We considered that possibility . . . but only briefly. The threat assessment, predicated upon our intelligence, portends a major event. We need to be prepared for whatever comes down the pike, Andy. With Iran at the helm and Russia at the stern, we could use your help.”

“Why don’t we start with something informal—a brief call between the president and the prime minister?”

“If we had the leisure of time, a low-key approach would make perfect sense. But we believe an attack may be imminent. If I may suggest, let’s err on the side of inclusion in this first meeting.”

“That’s not going to be easy, Aaron. Our people are not sitting idly on the sidelines waiting to be summoned.”

“Nor ours. If your president orders it, I trust his subordinates will be present. Our leaders will be available at President Conner’s convenience.”

“I’ll get back to you.” Thomas disconnected, paused momentarily to reflect on what he had just heard, and then placed a call to Jonathan Conner.

“Thank you for taking my call, Mr. President. I’m afraid I have a matter of extreme urgency,” Thomas advised.

“What isn’t urgent these days?” an unruffled Conner replied.

Since assuming office, his administration had faced unprecedented threats to national security, including a biological attack that killed tens of thousands of Americans. It was followed a year later by the detonation of a nuclear device in New York. It was a war-time administration, though the threats were not carried out on conventional battlefields, but in solitary acts of terror.

Before the secretary could respond, Conner continued. “If this is about the Israelis’ concern that the Iranians are stepping up their nuclear program, it’s not the time to discuss it . . . not until we are ready to respond.”

“Sir, the concern involves the Israelis but does not focus on the Iranian weapons program. I just spoke with Ambassador Lerner. It appears that the Israelis believe an attack on their homeland may be imminent.”

“By whom?” Conner questioned.

“The Syrian Coalition, Mr. President.”

“Based upon what? I assume that Coalition has their hands full cleaning up in the aftermath of eight years of

civil war. I'm sure they're more interested in determining their respective roles going forward than in destroying their neighbor."

"Sir, Ambassador Lerner suggested that there is credible intelligence to support their assertion—intelligence they wish to share with us in a video-teleconference at your earliest convenience."

"What are they asking for, Andy, beyond the teleconference?"

"I assume they will be asking for our full support as a counter-balance against the Russians."

"That's all we need—just as we are finally beginning to heal as a nation."

"I understand your concern, Sir, but I don't see that we have much choice. To abrogate our responsibility to Israel's security would damage our reputation beyond repair."

"I know that, God damn it! But that doesn't mean I have to like it. Get it set up as soon as possible," Conner ordered.

"Yes, Sir." Thomas reached to hang up the phone, but stopped at the sound of Conner's voice.

"One more thing—I want Commander Hart in the meeting. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

Conner disconnected the call.

Commander John Hart was Conner's go-to person in emergencies. Hart had been instrumental in pulling the country back from the abyss during both the biological and the nuclear attacks.

At 6'4" and 250 pounds, the former Navy SEAL was a unique physical specimen. His body formed an inverted pyramid with a small waist giving rise to massive shoulders.

Hart's neck measured more than twenty inches in circumference and led to a strong, handsome face with intense brown eyes.

But as tough as he looked, it was not his physical condition that was most intimidating. It was Hart's formidable intellect.

Hart graduated from Carnegie-Mellon University with a degree in nuclear engineering, then joined the Navy, where he was assigned to an Ohio-class submarine. Following three years of submersion in the world's oceans, Hart was ready to be top-side. He applied to the Navy's Sea, Air, and Land Forces, where he not only passed the SEAL's rigorous physical screening test, but set a record in the 500-meter swim.

Six years of running black ops in the world's sewers followed before the Navy decided there were better ways to harness Hart's gifts. He was sent back to graduate school to pursue a Master's in molecular biology. The commander graduated from Georgetown with high honors, after which he matriculated to Johns Hopkins, where he earned his medical degree. He completed Fellowship training at the United States Army Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. Hart did a stint at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, before settling into his permanent home at CIA.

In short, he was the nation's premier badass—and a man who had survived a close encounter with a 15-kiloton nuclear bomb. Had it not been for Hart, much of New York City would be a radioactive wasteland. And, had it not been for Hart, millions would have perished from a man-made epidemic of hemorrhagic smallpox.

Thomas waited five minutes before calling Conner's chief of staff, Jim Lutz, to schedule the teleconference.

"I plan to clear the president's schedule from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m.," Lutz informed Thomas. "The President will want all attendees, with the exception of Ambassador Lerner, assembled for a short briefing fifteen minutes prior to uplink with the Israelis. The ambassador may join us as soon as that briefing terminates."

Thomas had a green light to begin recruiting additional attendees. He started with Hart, and in short order had arranged for the nation's key advisors to be present, including National Security Advisor Adam Herrington, Secretary of Defense Mark Oliver, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Joe Sanford, CENTCOM Commander General Chuck Rotel, as well as CIA Director Katherine Wolf and Deputy Director Marvin Kahn. His final call was to the Israeli ambassador.

"Aaron, you've got your meeting. It is set for two p.m. Eastern in the Situation Room. The president has requested that you attend in person. You know the procedure—be sure to allow twenty minutes to park and clear security. And one more request: The president has asked that you provide a list of Israeli attendees ASAP."

"Of course. I will have it to you in the next few minutes. Thank you, Andy."

"The best thanks you can give me, Aaron, is to demonstrate that Avi is not crying wolf. President Conner is going to want proof of the urgency of the situation."

"I'd rather prove almost anything else, my friend, but your point is taken. We will make it clear as to why we have sounded a warning siren."

Commander John Hart was the first to arrive at the Situation Room. Hart had been a virtual fixture at the White House through the recent crises that had threatened the very soul of America. Through both his insights and actions, Hart had earned Conner's trust. But their bond was built upon more than trust . . . there was tremendous mutual respect for the shared values that impelled this warrior and his leader forward.

It had been several months since Conner last saw the commander. At the time, Hart was still recovering from burns suffered in the aftermath of the nuclear explosion in New York.

"Great to see you back to a hundred percent, Commander," Conner said as he clasped Hart's hand with both of his.

"It's good to be back, Sir."

Hart's wounds had indeed healed, but his physicians at Walter Reed had cautioned Hart that he was not out of the woods. There might be long-term sequelae resulting from the high dose of radiation he had received. Not one to worry about risks he could not mitigate, Hart had dismissed the doctors' concerns with a polite but succinct, "Thank you."

Conner continued, "I have a feeling we are going to need your talents on this one."

"Ready to Lead, Ready to Follow, Never Quit, Sir!" Hart repeated a SEAL mantra.

"That's what I wanted to hear, Commander. Have a seat; I'm going to call us to order."

All of the attendees had filed in during the brief time that Conner and Hart chatted. The president took his

seat at the head of the long table and waited for the din of conversation to fade before beginning his address.

“Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes, we will be connected with Prime Minister Rabinovich, as well as General Simon and Mr. Chaikin. Ambassador Lerner, who will be joining us momentarily, conveyed an urgent message earlier today from the prime minister. Mr. Rabinovich believes that Israel may be facing a grave threat. As you will soon hear, it relates to a recent meeting of the Syrian Coalition, coupled with intelligence that appears to portend the imminence of an attack on Israel.”

A brief stir among the attendees caused Conner to raise his hands, then push in a downward motion as if to put a lid on the volume.

“We only have a few minutes . . . if I may continue.” The room grew silent. “I am going to ask that you remain in your seats after we terminate the call so that we may debrief. Depending upon what we hear, I may elect to include the ambassador in that discussion. If so, I ask that you speak openly in our ally’s presence.”

At precisely two p.m., Lerner was shown into the room just as Prime Minister Rabinovich’s face appeared on camera. His normal smile was replaced by the look of a deeply troubled man, but his opening words were spoken with genuine warmth.

“Good morning, Mr. President. My colleagues and I extend our well wishes to you and your colleagues, and we thank you for honoring our urgent request.”

“I’m pleased we could comply, Prime Minister. You have our rapt attention.”

“I believe everyone knows David Chaikin,” Rabinovich said, though he knew that Israel’s chief spook needed no introduction. “I’m going to ask Mr. Chaikin to brief you on a recent meeting that took place at Doshan-Tappeh airbase near Tehran and its potential implications to Israel.”

Chaikin’s brilliance was evident the moment he opened his mouth, though he often tried to mute his intellectual prowess so as not to be misperceived as arrogant. He began with a roll-call of the attendees who had been present at Doshan-Tappeh, punctuated at the end by a single observation. “These, ladies and gentlemen, are the executioners assembled to bring death to the state of Israel.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Chaikin, that’s a bold assertion without substantiation,” Conner said.

“Allow me to provide some substantiation—including intelligence gleaned in the last few hours.” Chaikin then shared Assad’s mid-air conversations with his most senior general and his wife.

“Again, Mr. Chaikin, it could simply be hyperbole.”

“President Conner, would such words appear to be hyperbole if spoken by sworn adversaries of the United States? I mean no disrespect, Sir, just a perspective. There is more evidence, however. We’ve detected troop movement, accompanied by artillery, in western Syria. It appears that Syrian Army, IRGC, and Hezbollah are consolidating close to the Golan.”

Rabinovich motioned for Chaikin to be seated, then stood as he prepared to address the group.

“We are a tough country, President Conner, but not tough enough to battle a united front of Syria, Iran,

Hezbollah, and Russia. The Syrian Coalition could represent an existential threat to Israel.”

*Existential threat* was code for justifying Israel’s use of nuclear weapons—a fact that was not lost on a single attendee.

“Whatever the threat, it needs to be contained rapidly,” Conner stated.

“And how do you propose to do that, Mr. President?”

“By pledging the full military support of the United States in the protection of our ally, Israel. That’s something Mr. Putin will understand.”

“And will you have the support of your public and Congress for such a pledge? Your country tires of war, and there are ongoing calls for full withdrawal of all U.S. troops from the Middle East.”

“Congress understands the strategic significance of Israel, but more importantly, they appreciate the moral responsibility of the United States to defend it. We won’t have an issue, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“I appreciate your optimism, President Conner. Despite our resolve, remember that Israel is a small country threatened by giants.”

“Your people have already proven that a mere sling is sufficient to bring down giants,” Conner remarked. “Let’s hope that we can contain whatever conflict emerges, and there is no need for further discussion of escalation to unconventional weapons.”

“I pray you are right, my friend.”

“In addition to CENTCOM’s current integration with IDF, I would like a personal emissary on-site at the Bor . . . someone who will be privy to all operational issues as they

emerge in real time. I assume that's not too much to ask, Mr. Rabinovich, in exchange for our pledge of support?"

"Who do you have in mind, Mr. President?"

Conner gestured to his right. "Commander Hart. He can be on-site no later than tomorrow morning."

Hart needed no introduction. Rabinovich was acutely aware of the role the commander had played in stopping the biological and nuclear attacks on the U.S.

"We welcome you, Commander. Let us know as soon as your flight plan has been filed and we will arrange transportation from Ben Gurion Airport to the Kiryat."

The Kiryat was the government complex housing key elements of Israel's defense infrastructure.

"There you will meet with the Security Council, as well as those on today's video uplink."

"I will look forward to that, Sir."

When the satellite link was severed, the room seemed to take a deep breath.

"Mr. Lerner, I'm going to ask that you remain while we debrief."

The ambassador nodded in agreement, appreciative of Conner's efforts at transparency.

Joe Sanford, the recently appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was first to speak. "I think we may be reading too much into Assad's comments. Though it may be the aspirations of the Coalition to annex Israel, they've just finished one bloody war with tremendous attrition . . . I doubt they are in the mood for another."

"I'm not sure I agree with you, Joe," said Katherine Wolf, the Director of Central Intelligence. "Since the Islamic Revolution in '79, Iran has been counting down

the days until the destruction of Israel. If we look beyond the issue of battle-fatigued troops, the timing is quite good for an attack. Coalition troops are poised within striking distance of Israel's borders, and an armed Hezbollah and Hamas are chomping at the bit to strike Israeli cities with their missiles. I think the threat is quite real."

"What are you hearing from your counterparts in Israel?" Conner asked Wolf.

"They're nervous. You saw Amos Yadlin's comments in the spring of 2018. The former head of Israeli military intelligence believes that the coming months could be the most perilous time that Israel has faced in decades. The timing of his prediction may have been too aggressive, but I think his sentiment was right on point."

"Commander Hart, I want impeccable coordination between CENTCOM and IDF, and I want to be kept abreast, by the minute if necessary, of any substantive changes in the situation. Let's get out ahead of this one . . . not have to clean up afterwards. Is that understood, Commander?"

"Yes, Sir!"

Addressing the room, Conner added, "The region is like a pine forest during a drought. It won't take much to set it ablaze. If ignited, the resulting conflagration could easily spread beyond regional borders and evolve into a world war. Russia doesn't want that, but the Iranian theocracy is less predictable. Be prepared to meet at a moment's notice. Thank you—you are dismissed."

Before Hart could leave, Conner cornered him. "John, you are the one I rely on when things go to hell. You've never let me down, and I know you won't this time."

“No, Sir, I won’t.”

“I’ve asked Mr. Kahn to have a Gulfstream fueled and ready to go at 1800 hours. That’ll give you a few hours to go home, pack, and talk to Liz. You may be gone for a while, Commander.”

“Liz will understand, Sir.”

“Good luck, Commander!”

“Thank you, Sir.”



## CHAPTER SIX

### *Hart Prepares to Leave*

HART'S MIND WAS IN OVERDRIVE as he climbed into the form-fitting, black leather seat of his aging 850ci BMW. He fired up the 12-cylinder engine and tapped the gas, raising the car's baritone wail by an octave, then waited for the RPMs to fall before dropping it into gear. It was his one material indulgence—an exquisitely tuned machine that fed his need for speed. His destination was Georgetown, where he shared a two-bedroom condo with his wife, Dr. Elizabeth Wilkins.

As the blocks ticked by, Hart wondered what awaited him in Israel. He hoped that the anticipated threat of an attack by the Syrian Coalition proved to be much ado about nothing. But something in his gut told him otherwise. Israel had long been at a tipping point, and Hart sensed that the fine line separating peace and world war was about to be crossed.

He mused about his fate: How long would he be there? Would he return? How would Liz handle it if he was killed in action? These were new thoughts to the battle-hardened warrior—thoughts he had never before permitted to enter his mind.

“I guess this is what happens when you get married,” he said to himself as if surprised. He’d never before questioned whether he would emerge from a mission intact, nor if anyone would shed a tear if he failed to survive.

Hart and Wilkins were newlyweds, married for less than a year. It had been a tumultuous courtship bookended by the two terrorist attacks on their country. The couple vowed that, if they could survive those calamities, they could survive marriage.

They were wed in a small ceremony at Trinity United Methodist Church in McLean, Virginia. Two people officiated over the private ceremony—Pastor Scott Hamilton and President Jonathan Conner. At the time of their marriage, the commander was still on the mend, while his wife was commuting weekly to her job at the CDC in Atlanta.

Liz had always viewed her work at the CDC as far more of a calling than a career. Her responsibilities in the BioLevel-IV laboratory involved studying some of the most deadly viruses and bacteria known to man—so-called “Category A” pathogens.

Each time she entered the lab, Liz donned an impenetrable space suit tethered to long hoses that kept her bathed in clean air. When she left, a strict process for decontamination was required. Yet, even with its unusual demands, it never felt like work to Liz . . . she was fascinated at the efficiency with which such organisms killed, and it became her personal mission to discover ways to defeat them.

Yet, despite her insatiable appetite for learning and her commitment to the CDC, the strain of living apart five days a week had taken a toll. Having twice looked death in the face, she had a new-found appreciation for

the fleetingness of life. Now, more than anything, she yearned for a simple life with the man she loved. After discussing it with John, she had tendered her resignation three months earlier.

When President Conner learned of her decision, he implored Liz to remain in government. She had proven invaluable during the bioterrorism attack, and Conner didn't want to lose her. With the president's encouragement, Liz accepted a position as the CIA's senior counter-terrorism analyst over biological threats on the day her resignation from CDC took effect. She now shared both home and work with the Commander.

Without taking his eyes off the road, Hart pressed the speed-dial button on his phone. Liz answered on the second ring.

"Hello, Cowboy, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she cooed playfully. It was her pet name for her lover—one that not only captured his persona, but also alluded to his years spent growing up on a Montana ranch.

Hart's tone was not so playful. "Darling . . . I am glad I caught you. I'm headed back to the condo to pick up my things before catching a flight out of town. What are the chances of you taking off early today and meeting me there . . . say, in thirty minutes?"

"I'm putting on my coat as we speak. I'll see you shortly." Liz could read between the lines. John would never cavalierly request that she play hookey in the middle of the day unless something was up.

Traffic was still light at three p.m., and it took little time for Hart to traverse the twenty blocks to the condo. Liz was not far behind.

Hart had already begun to pack when he heard Liz turning the lock on the front door.

A moment later, she was standing at the door of the bedroom. She greeted him with a kiss before eyeing the large suitcase atop the bed.

“That’s no overnight bag, Commander. It looks like you’re planning to be gone for a while.”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“Can you be less cryptic, Cowboy?”

Since the earliest days of their relationship, there had been a tug-of-war over what Hart could reveal about his missions. Much of that schism had been mended when President Conner intervened, and with her new position, raised the level of Liz’s security clearance to that of the commander’s. Yet some tension still remained.

With one hand, he raised his finger to his lips to quell the conversation, and with the other he pointed towards their second bedroom, which served as Hart’s office. It had been rendered secure from electronic eavesdropping by the Agency.

“You and your secrecy,” Liz chided him. “I’m sure that Mrs. Tupper next door is listening with bated breath to our every word.” Still, she retreated to the safety of the office.

Hart closed the door before speaking. “I’m leaving for Israel in a few hours. The president has asked me to be his liaison to the Israeli Security Cabinet until otherwise ordered.”

“What does that mean? Why is he sending you there?”

“Things appear to be heating up.”

“What do you meaning, ‘heating up’? How much hotter can they get?”

“I can’t get into the details. Suffice it to say there are credible threats against the security of Israel, and the president wants someone on the ground appraising him of any material developments in real time.”

“When will you be back?”

“Come on, Darling, how many times have we been through this? I may be home in a few days . . . or a few weeks . . . at the outside, a few months. It’s out of my control.”

He could see the disappointment in her face. He took her hand in his and guided it gently towards his lips. Kissing it softly, he looked directly into Liz’s eyes. “I won’t keep you in the dark. I promise.”

“You damn well better not, Cowboy!” Liz said with a smile that broke the tension. “Are we done?” she asked.

“Yes, but what’s the rush?”

“I thought you had a plane to catch. Come on. I’ll help you finish packing.”



The Gulfstream comfortably seated twelve, but Hart was its only passenger. The flight from Washington National to Ben Gurion International would take approximately nine hours—landing at eleven o’clock the following morning. Hart knew there would be little chance for sleep once he hit the ground, so he’d better rest now.

He closed his eyes and thought about Liz. Then he turned his attention towards God. Prayer was something new to the commander. Though he had been brought up in a conservative Christian family, Hart’s relationship with God had been virtually severed when his youngest brother, Matthew, died while under his watch.

His mother had asked him to keep an eye on the boy for an hour, and promised a fresh-baked cherry pie in return. She didn't need to ask twice—they bolted out the door like a rocket and made a beeline towards the pond. As they approached the muddy bank, John cautioned his younger brother.

“I'm going to teach you how to skip rocks, then I'm going to leave you for just a few minutes to practice while I go hunting for a prairie dog.” He pointed to his .22 caliber rifle and nodded confidently. “You know Dad says their holes can cause our cows to break a leg. We wouldn't want that, would we?”

Matthew shook his head *no*.

“I don't want you getting any closer to the water. And do not climb up on the dock. It's not safe. Do you understand me, Matt?”

Matthew nodded his head, *yes*.

Before embarking on his safari, John armed Matthew with a dozen flat skipping stones, and provided him with a modicum of instruction. He reiterated his message to stay away from the water and the dock . . . then left the boy alone.

Less than ten minutes elapsed before John returned from a successful hunt holding one very dead prairie dog in his left hand and his rifle in his right. As he cleared a ridge, the lake came into sharp focus. Matthew was nowhere to be found. John dropped the animal carcass and rifle, and began running full-bore towards the pond.

As he drew closer, he could see beyond the end of the dock—to a body floating faced down in the water. Screaming for help, he dragged Matthew's lifeless body out of the water, but it was too late. He was gone.

That moment in time forever changed the trajectory of John Hart's life. When his second brother was killed in the Twin Towers, any lingering belief in God died with him.

Had it not been for his survival against impossible odds during two terrorist attacks, the commander's heart might have remained forever closed. But those experiences, coupled with his ever-deepening love for Liz, brought grace . . . and with it, the rekindling of his faith. Finishing his prayers, Hart whispered *Amen* before drifting off to sleep.

He remained asleep until the vibrations of his phone brought him back to the moment. He glanced at it to see who was calling. It was CIA Deputy Director Kahn on the line.

"Yes, Sir," Hart answered.

"It's begun, Commander. Gaza has erupted in violence."