

 THE NINEVEH
PROJECT

By

CRAIG
ALEXANDER

Cover design by Jeremy Robinson

 BREAKNECK BOOKS
PUBLISHING COMPANY

Published by Breakneck Books (USA)
www.breakneckbooks.com

First printing, June 2007

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Printed in the United States of America.

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For Stephanie and Darby

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the leadership of Pinelake Church both past and present, especially, Tommy Politz, Larry Herndon, Bob Buckner, Dr. Chip Henderson, Tim Smith, Robert Green, and Rick Psonak. You have all had a profound influence on me and have been instrumental in my spiritual growth.

Thank you to the guys in my Bible study group, especially, Greg Buie, Byron Galloway, Hal Sherman, Jim Stefkovich, and Derek Wells. Your support for this book and your friendship through the years means more to me than you'll ever know. You guys are great.

Thanks to Dr. Tommy Cabell and Tim Wickersham for putting up with me droning on-and-on about this story as I wrote it, for your input on earlier drafts, your help with some of the fight scenes and technical details about weapons. Also, thanks to my friend Special Agent Joe Hess of the Secret Service for your help with some of the lingo in the book.

Thank you to Breakneck Books for taking a chance on an unknown writer, and to editor Charity Heller-Hogue for helping me put the final touches on the manuscript.

I have a special debt of gratitude to writer and editor Donna Fleisher. With patience and kindness you took the time to not only help me polish the roughest of manuscripts, but to teach me what I needed to know (which was a lot) about the craft of novel writing. Without you this book would never have been published. I am eternally grateful.

Thank you to my entire family for their continuing love and support, especially my wife Stephanie, and my daughter Darby.

Last but certainly not least, thank the Lord God Almighty.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” **Jonah 1:1-2**

PROLOGUE

DEATH marches. The wrath of God is upon them. While his family waits, Simeon stands alone at the edge of a precipice gazing into the valley below. An arid wind tousles his hair and whips his clothing. Eyes crinkled against the rising sun's glare, he absorbs the view, drinking it in, pressing it into his memory. The scene below him is one of beauty and tranquility: a vast metropolis carved in the midst of this oasis in the desert. The great river Tigris winds lazily past the city's walls, bringing with it life and abundance.

Why couldn't his countrymen recognize the danger?

In the distance, past the walls of the city, the rising sun glints off of a multitude of swords, spears, and shields. The banners of the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians are harbingers of doom. His family is one of the few leaving. The rest foolishly believe what they were told: no army could penetrate their defenses, breach their walls, or withstand their army. The king, in his arrogance, even planned a banquet in the hours before the city's invasion.

The dust from the feet of the soldiers, horse's hooves, and chariot's wheels creates a cloud that seem to reach to the heavens. The morning sunlight shines through the dust, giving it a blood-red caste, an omen of death.

They had been warned. Jonah's call to repentance had briefly persuaded them to turn from their sinfulness, but once the threat of destruction was forgotten, the wickedness returned.

Simeon looks for the last time at the city he calls home. When the king's herald's raised the alarm, warning of the army's approach, Simeon gathered his family and belongings and fled.

As the prophet foretold, this great city is about to be destroyed, razed to the ground for its wickedness.

He tears his eyes away and turns to join his waiting family.

Northeastern Iraq: January 2003

HUSSAAM Uzeen Zaafer stood among a copse of trees at the edge of the desert. The night was tranquil and quiet, the sky clear. The sands surrounding the trees seemed to glow from the light of the stars. Nearby mountains were black silhouettes on the horizon. A cooling breeze rustled the leaves overhead.

Although his two bodyguards were loyal and well trained, fully capable of keeping watch and identifying danger, Hussaam trusted no one. There was no margin for error, and he could not risk anyone noticing them enter the hidden entrance in the rock face. He had taken a great risk coming here himself, but this was too important to leave to someone else.

The day of his vengeance was at hand.

The concealed door they were about to enter, far from the visible remains of the Sennacherib palace site, led into a vast underground labyrinth beneath the ruins of what had once been the greatest city in the world. The city had stretched for miles along the Tigris River in the area commonly known as the Fertile Crescent, a literal island of green in a sea of sand. All that was left on the surface were ruins, long-ago scavenged for the valuables they once contained.

With a final scan of their surroundings, Hussaam swept aside the brush covering a hidden locking mechanism and punched a code into an electronic keypad. With a quiet hiss and a rush of cool air, a door opened. Behind the door seem, to the casual observer, to be the entrance to ancient catacombs. A more thorough inspection would reveal hi-tech surveillance and detection technology.

Hussaam and his two companions followed the dark passageway, the sand softly crunching beneath their feet. After a slight bend, out of sight of the exterior entrance, they encountered a large metal door. He keyed in another code and it opened.

Two guards snapped to attention. "Mr. Zaafer, the prisoner is being held in his office," said one.

With a nod, Hussaam continued into the corridor. Even in his disgruntled state, he looked around him and admired the facility. After the 1991 invasion by U.S.-led forces, the vast catacombs, and tunnel systems

of this once great city had been turned into a state-of-the-art research and manufacturing facility. Its purpose: the production of chemical and biological weapons, out of sight of the U.N. inspectors and the prying eyes of rest of the world.

His people encountered little resistance convincing Saddam Hussein to allow this facility to be built. The dictator's insatiable desire for power and revenge made him easily swayed. Saddam had, of course, been convinced that the lion's share of the weapons would be at his disposal.

Everything possible had been done to convince the dictator to at least show the pretense of acquiescing to the U.N. sanctions, but Saddam's ego made him openly defiant of their demands, potentially jeopardizing Hussaam's plans.

He regretted having to cease operations prematurely, but there was no alternative. An attack by the U.S. was inevitable. Over the last few weeks, the laboratory equipment and weapons created with them had been removed.

After traversing several corridors, they entered the director's office. Hussaam's bodyguards surveyed the room as they took up positions on either side of it.

Two members of the facility's security team stood on either side of a seated man. His name was Abdul. His eyes were large and pupils dilated. Beads of sweat lined his brow. Hussaam had known the man since college and had personally put him in charge of this operation. He had been caught leaving in the night with materials that would have compromised the entire operation.

Hussaam wouldn't allow that to happen; he had spent his entire adult life bringing his plans to fruition. "Why did you do it, Abdul?" He kept his voice steady, without a hint of anger or frustration.

"Do what? Please, I did nothing."

"Have you told anyone of our plans?"

"No, of course not. I have always been loyal to you."

"Then why were you sneaking out in the night with plans to this facility and papers that could compromise me? Haven't I always been good to you and paid you well?"

Before the man could answer, Hussaam held up a hand for silence. He moved to the intercom on the desk. Pressing a button, he called the chief of security. "Has this traitor gotten any information to anyone on the outside?"

“No, sir. I can’t find any evidence that he has. Before we caught him, he had not left the compound in weeks.”

“Keep looking. We must be absolutely sure. If you have the slightest doubt, inform me immediately.” With a wave of his hand, Hussaam motioned the security officers away from the captive. “Stand up, Abdul.” It was a command, not a request. “I will make you a deal. If you can get past me, you can leave.”

Abdul stood, obviously digesting what he had just been told. His facial expressions ran the gambit from fear to a brief flicker of hope.

The moment Hussaam registered hope in the man’s eyes, he lashed out with a claw-hand strike. The blow smashed the traitor’s throat with a crunching, tearing sound. The man dropped to the floor, his feet no longer able to support him. Air passage crushed, unable to draw breath, he writhed in wide-eyed agony on the floor. With a final convulsion, his movements ceased.

Turning from the corpse, Hussaam uttered a quiet command. “Get him out of my sight.” He punched the intercom button again. “Make sure there is nothing left here that could expose us if this facility is found, and make sure the entrances are sealed and security measures are in place after we leave.”

“Yes, Mr. Zaafer. It will be done.”

Hussaam would be a god, and the nations would tremble. No one would be allowed to stand in his way, not even a man he considered a friend, of which he had few.

He glanced around the office ensuring everything of importance had been removed. Satisfied, he walked to the far wall and placed his palm against a concealed biometric scanner. A section of the wall slid to the side, revealing a hidden cabinet. He eyed the two black metal cases within and a smile touched his lips. He caressed the tops of the cases and a tingle coursed through his fingers. The power contained within intoxicated and thrilled him: two briefcase thermonuclear bombs, each with more destructive capability than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima.

His fingers moved to the case on the right and tapped a code into the locking mechanism. He lifted the top and inserted a key. The bomb’s electronic readouts flashed to life, bathing his face in green and amber light.

Although the invisible and silent killers created in the labs down the hall were capable of much greater damage, these devices had a much more dramatic effect.

PART I

An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshal all your strength! **Nahum 2:1**

CHAPTER I

Present day: Flowood, Mississippi

THE answer is in Nabum.

This strange and unusual phrase had passed through Aaron Henderson's mind all day. No, that didn't quite describe it. The phrase bounced, banged, careened, and jolted through his mind. The arcane passage had been spoken to him in a dream the previous night, and he couldn't clear it from his thoughts. Disturbing images plagued his sleep of late, each night growing in intensity, ripping him from slumber with cold sweats and shakes, leaving him tired and eyesore by day.

The foot zooming toward his face snapped his attention to his present situation. No time to block. He dropped his head beneath the kick, stepped to the side, and the foot grazed the back of his skull as it passed.

A flurry of punches and kicks flew at his face and body. He blocked and parried, using his palms to sweep away the blows. The attacker seemed to sense an opening and moved in for the finish, pressing the assault, one strike flowing into the next. Aaron backpedaled as he deflected the onslaught. A kick slipped beneath his guard and caught him in the ribs, forcing a whoosh of air from his mouth.

Focus.

His opponent stood much shorter than Aaron's own six-foot-three-inch frame, but the man was fast, aggressive, and skilled. A heel slashed toward him—a side-kick unleashed in the direction of his forehead. He deflected the strike with the inside of his forearm, unbalancing his attacker. His opponent's eyes squinted, telling Aaron the block had inflicted some pain. Good.

He pressed the attack with a flurry of his own, a series of alternating punches and kicks. A low kick followed by a high punch. Low punch, high kick. The last kick was blocked but left an opening. He slid in and

delivered a short right to the sternum. The technique brought them close together. Sweat poured from Aaron and his breathing was labored. The fight needed to end. He followed the punch in and grabbed a shoulder, preparing to lever his opponent onto his hip and toss him to the ground.

The answer is in Nahum.

The world turned upside down. The ceiling, flag-decked walls, and a flash of white uniform with black trim flickered past as he was thrown to the floor, his own attack stymied and reversed. Aaron smacked into the mat with a loud whap. He absorbed the impact on an outstretched arm, leg, and the lateral muscles of his back.

He glanced at the black belt tied around his white uniform, its ends splayed on the floor, three gold stripes adorning the left side. Those stripes were more than decoration. They were supposed to mean something. He slapped the mat with his palm. He should never allow himself be distracted that way. On the street it could be fatal.

His opponent leaned over, face split by a white-toothed grin beneath close-cropped brown hair. The smiling face belonged to Joseph Harris, agent in the Secret Service, training partner, and friend. "You okay, old man?" Joseph extended a hand.

At thirty-six, the nickname was more the result of Aaron's demeanor and conservative attitude than his age. Ignoring the barb, Aaron grasped the offered hand and jumped to his feet. "I'm fine. Wipe that grin off your face." He tugged his uniform into place before bowing formally to his opponent.

* * * * *

Dressed in street clothes, a blue tee-shirt and jeans, Aaron dropped his gear bag and leaned against the hood of his car, waiting while Joseph locked the school. A long standing tradition, their informal Friday night training sessions were as much about hanging out together as improving skills.

Joseph rounded the hood and plopped against the car, crossing his arms. "What's up?"

Hands stuffed in his pockets Aaron stared at the headlights of passing cars. The glare burned his tired eyes.

"I said what's up? Where are you tonight?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm just a little distracted. A little tired."

His friend glared, apparently waiting for Aaron to elaborate. “Well?” Joseph asked. “What’s going on?”

“Dreams. Weird, strange, disturbing dreams. I haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep in weeks.” Aaron waited, expecting a sarcastic comeback.

“What are they about?”

Aaron narrowed his eyes, surprised by the lack of a smart reply. “You must be losing your edge. That was a great opening for a zinger.”

Joseph shrugged his shoulders. “I’m a man of many layers. You just fail to see my depth.”

“Uh, uh. Layers.”

“Are to going tell me about the dreams or not?”

“They’re about death. Destruction. Strange disjointed images of carnage in an ancient city. And last night a voice spoke to me.” He nodded his head. “Yep. Now I’m hearing voices in my sleep.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you dinner. Sarah and Abby will be asleep when you get home anyway.” Joseph slapped Aaron on the back. “You can tell me all about it. I won’t even make fun of you. At least ’til the salad comes.”

“You’re a real prince, Joseph.”

* * * * *

Amman Jordan: 7:03 a.m.-Eastern European Time

From the office of his international headquarters, Hussaam Udeen Zaafer stared through the windows at the city, his hands clasped behind him. In the parking lot below, a large sign displayed his company’s logo: a white outline of a hawk on a field of blue and printed beneath in white letters was the company’s name, Hawk Pharmaceuticals. The sight of it never failed to please him. The nickname “Hawk” had been bestowed upon him as a youth due to his dark brown, almost black, eyes, and penetrating gaze.

He turned and glanced toward a framed photo on his desk. It pictured him on his wedding day with his bride, Fatima, and her uncle, the former monarch of Jordan, King Hussein. Hussaam had been granted the privilege of marrying into the royal family as a reward for his service to the former king. Upon the monarch’s death from cancer, his son, Abdullah II, Fatima’s first cousin, was crowned. Like his father before him, Abdullah betrayed his people by signing a peace agreement with

Hussaam's enemies. He bit back the bitter taste of anger and allowed the trace of a smile to play across his lips. Soon, the price of that betrayal would be paid in full. Soon, his goals would be achieved and his people would be liberated.

Hussaam eased into his chair and removed a leather wallet from his coat pocket. He laid the wallet on the desk and extracted three photos from a recessed pouch. The pictures were yellowed with age and though he did not understand why he kept them, he was unable to part with them. He traced a finger over the images of his mother and father before picking up the photo of a young boy. A boy he had not seen in years. A boy whose features closely resembled Hussaam's. *It will not be much longer, my brother.* Hussaam gently tucked the photos into place and returned the wallet to his pocket.

On a wall opposite him, one of the many mounted TV monitors showed an American twenty-four-hour news channel. Hussaam still could not believe his fortune. Mere days before the Americans invaded Iraq, he completed the transport of his chemical and biological weapons out of the hidden base. In the end, all it cost him was time. But now, all the pieces were in place.

A large cache of weapons and a new base were hastily set up in the mountains of Northeastern Syria. At first he feared America was doing more than saber rattling toward Syria. They had proof that Syrians were crossing the border into Iraq to lead terror attacks on their troops, and the Syrian government continued to allow terror training camps to remain in operation. It looked as if the Americans would not be dissuaded from taking action. It could have been disastrous, further delaying, possibly even ruining, his plans.

He chuckled to himself. It was one the few times he was glad to be wrong: the Americans had done nothing. The American's own political games made them doubt themselves and weakened their resolve. Confidence in their intelligence was so eroded that even if they somehow got wind of his plans, they would probably be too hesitant to act. There was only one remaining person from Saddam's regime who could identify Hussaam and his role in the base in Iraq: Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri had been found, and any threat he might pose would soon be removed. Al-Douri had been smarter than the rest of Saddam's henchmen. He left Iraq before the Americans struck, taking millions in cash with him. But he would not escape his fate. In the end, it would be the same as his dead compatriots.

The fact that no “weapons of mass destruction” had been found in Iraq caused great rifts within the American populace. Even now it seemed as if every other news report asked, “Where are the WMDs?” WMDs, WMDs, this term was ingrained in the American lexicon. Now, the American government concluded there never were any weapons.

Another small smile formed on his lips. He had no idea his subterfuge would have such an unintended, yet so welcome, consequence.

* * * * *

Colombia: 1:10 a.m.-Eastern Standard Time

Captain Derek Galloway peered through the dense foliage at his objective: a large ranch-style mansion in the midst of a jungle on the lower slopes of the Baudo mountains, near the pacific coast. He absorbed every detail of the terrain and the heavily guarded grounds. The stars above shone so bright and close it seemed as if he could reach out and touch them. It was moist and hot; the air pressed upon him with a palpable force. Sweat dripped from his pores, causing his black fatigues to cling to his skin. He resisted the urge to wipe his damp forehead, instead blotting it with a sleeve so as not to risk smearing his black face-paint.

He glanced at the men behind him—a group of the most elite fighting men in the world. All of them experienced and battle-hardened, and each hand picked to be part of this team.

He reached down and clutched the silver cross in the side pocket of his black fatigues. He shouldn't have it on him, but he didn't believe it would give away his identity if found. Members of units involved in black ops were forbidden to have anything on their person to identify them in case they were captured or killed.

He mouthed a silent prayer, steeling himself for combat. Many had questioned his seemingly at-odds career and faith. How could a man of God be a soldier? The answer was that he believed he was doing right, protecting his country and the world from evil. Although America had her problems, he believed in her inherent goodness. Derek believed she was a bastion of freedom and light in a largely dark and oppressive world. His beliefs also affected his decision to pursue a career in special operations. There was less gray area. He had clearly defined targets and objectives. Sometimes indiscriminate killing was a necessary evil in conventional battles.

After all, as he was fond of telling his men, where better to have God on your side than in battle? His favorite scripture said, “With God on my side, who can stand against me?” Although his men gave him a hard time about his devotion to his faith, they would follow him into hell, and often had.

Tonight they were after a big fish, someone who might be able to tell them what actually went down in Iraq before it was invaded. They had come to capture Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, the former Vice Chairman of the Baath Party’s Revolutionary Command Council and a longtime confidant of Saddam Hussein. He was also the highest-ranking member of Saddam’s regime left at large.

Derek and his team needed to make it quick, in and out, no hitches. They were operating in a foreign country without its government’s permission. Despite repeated requests from Colombia’s elected government for aid in squelching the rebel forces attempting to overthrow them, it was the strict policy of the United States to remain “hands off” in Colombia. The Baudo mountains were controlled by a rebel group known as the FARC, *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo*, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—Peoples Army. Utterly ruthless, the “people’s” army was funded by extortion, kidnapping, and the illegal drug trade. The mountains were crawling with them. Obviously al-Douri had their blessing, or he wouldn’t be there.

His capture wouldn’t be a cakewalk. The house was well lit and well guarded.

He raised his hand and signaled the men to fan out and take their positions. He clutched the mike at his throat and whispered, “Anvil, this is Hammer. We’re in position. Do we have a green light on mission?”

The reply came quickly: “Hammer, this is Anvil. You have a green light.”

* * * * *

From his office and ops center deep in the bowels of the CIA’s old headquarters building in Langley, Virginia, Harold “Hal” Bouie studied a bank of monitor screens. The screens showed infrared- and night-enhanced aerial views of the compound that Captain Derek Galloway’s team was about to infiltrate.

“Hammer, there are no rebel forces near you. I have infrareded of the guards. It doesn’t look like they know you’re there. Most are smoking and talking to each other. I count two stationary in front, two stationary in the rear, and four patrolling the perimeter. Do you have their positions?”

“Anvil, we have their positions marked.”

“Hammer, there will be more of them inside. I don’t know exactly how many. Hit them hard and fast, and be careful.”

“Affirmative, Anvil. We’ll return soon with a house guest for you. Hammer out.”

A tip from a friend, the U.S. Deputy Director of National Intelligence, had alerted Hal to al-Douri’s location. His capture could be a coup on a grand scale. The information al-Douri might possess could alter the world’s opinion of the United States and its actions. Not to mention their own populace.

Hal plopped into a chair. There was nothing to do but wait and let Captain Galloway do his job.

By special order of the president after September 11th, a unique twelve-man terrorist strike force had been created. For the first time, Delta and Seal operatives had been put together in a single unit, in the utmost secrecy, for one reason: to hunt down terrorists wherever they might be. The mixture of Delta and Seal team members would enable them to operate anywhere on land or sea. They worked outside of the normal chain of command which enabled them to act quickly and avoid red tape.

He watched the bank of monitor screens. Galloway was moving in—it was crunch time, the most difficult period of an operation for Hal. All he could do was watch. His fingers strummed the arm of the chair as his foot tapped. Nervous energy finally overcame him. He pushed himself out of the chair and began to pace.

When the president created the special terrorist strike force, he had requested Hal by name to be its eyes and ears. Hal ordered and organized their missions and answered only to the president. He helped direct the movement of Captain Derek Galloway’s team, using his own resources as well as those of the NSA, FBI, and CIA. After a long career as a field operative, he had become a CIA analyst in the ‘90s. His was one of the loudest voices urging the government to pay attention to the growing threat of terrorism and to step up their anti-terror efforts. The

failure to stop September 11th and the seeming debacle over Iraq's missing weapons was something he had taken very personally.

Now, he had been given the resources to hunt down America's enemies, no matter what hole in which they were hidden.

He glanced at his watch. The action was about to start. He extracted a cigarette from his pocket and stuck it between his lips. He dug out a lighter and flicked it to life with his thumb before placing the flame to the cigarette's tip. He puffed a deep, satisfying drag, blowing a cloud of swirling smoke toward the ceiling.

Godspeed, Derek.

* * * * *

"All right, we have a green light," Derek whispered into his throat mike. "Move in. Hands signals only from here." His fingers slid across his weapons, ensuring they were in place and secure. Four groups of three would take out each set of guards. Derek and two of his corporals, Chavez and Johnson, would take out the guards at the front and go in after al-Douri.

His group's targeted guards paced back and forth before the front entrance of the mansion. The moment they turned away, Derek led his men silently forward, like black wraiths melting into the shadows. When the guards completed their patrol and turned back, Derek held up his hand. His men went still, barely breathing. When the guards turned away again, he lifted his sleeve to look at the glowing dial of his watch. He pulled his night-vision goggles over his eyes just as the power to the compound was cut, blanketing the men in total darkness.

Derek signaled again, and his group sprinted toward the two guards. As they drew near, one of the guards sensed their approach and turned, brandishing his weapon. In the green light of Derek's goggles, the barrel of the man's .44 Magnum looked as large and dark as a cave. Fortunately, the man appeared more worried about survival than duty, in defending himself rather than raising an alarm. With an open-handed slap, Derek knocked the pistol away. He grabbed the guard by the shoulders and with a quick push-pull motion, twisted the man around so a rear choke hold could be applied. Once Derek had him secured, Johnson stabbed a tranquilizer into his neck.

The third member of Derek's group, Chavez, approached the remaining guard. Chavez stayed low, moving in a crouch. Once in position, he seized the man from the rear, applying a submission hold.

Johnson moved quickly to the second guard and repeated the tranquilizing process.

Chavez and Johnson dragged the two unconscious guards into a clump of bushes. Derek peered at the waiting house, which glowed green through his goggles. He reached up and flipped a switch, making his vision infrared. The view changed from green to black, spotted with red. The red indicated heat signatures which he used to seek out any hidden guards. Satisfied, he switched back to night-vision. He cocked his ears, listening to sounds of the night: the trilling of bugs, the skittering of small animals, the wind rustling leaves. Nothing seemed wrong; it remained quiet. After scanning the front of the house a moment longer, they moved into the covered entry porch where the darker shadows swallowed them.

A beam of light pierced the glass beside the front door, momentarily blinding him until he pushed his goggles up on his forehead. Derek and his men flattened against the wall, melting into the heavier gloom. The front door swung open and a huge form stepped into view, one hand holding a flashlight. A pistol was tucked underneath an arm, placed there to free up a hand which had twisted open the lock. The man was huge, his bulk filled the entrance. He yelled, "You guys okay out there?"

Derek launched from his position. The man's eyes moved toward the motion before going wide, and he reached for his gun. He opened his mouth and sucked in air to shout an alarm. As the sound welled up in the guard's throat, Derek delivered a vicious kick to the man's sternum. A small groan escaped his lips as he doubled over. Johnson stepped forward and jabbed the man in the neck with a tranquilizer.

He still had some fight in him and tried to raise his gun, but Johnson intervened with a solid right hand to the head. The large man staggered and fell to his knees, succumbing to the punishment and chemicals.

Chavez muscled his way past the guard, gun at the ready, to cover the interior of the mansion. Derek followed and crouched on the opposite side of the doorway, sliding his night-vision goggles into place as he moved. He surveyed the interior. They stood in a large foyer with checkered marble floor tiles, and fluted columns rising to the high ceiling. Paintings adorned the walls and statuary filled darkened niches. Two large staircases, bordered by intricately carved balustrades, curved up

either side of the room. The steps intersected at a landing on the second level and two shorter sets of stairs split away, connecting with hallways on left and right. The hallway on the left led to the master suite.

Satisfied there was so immediate threat, Derek waved his men ahead. Chavez took the left staircase, Johnson the right. They bounded up the stairs to take positions on the landing.

On their signal, Derek moved to join them. As he crossed the foyer, a shadow moved to his left. He spun toward the motion, raising his gun. His finger caressed the trigger.

A woman whom he assumed to be household staff crept forward, one hand on the wall, feeling her way through the dark.

Derek released the pressure on the trigger and continued. The woman was oblivious to his presence.

He climbed the stairs two at a time. At the upper landing, he placed his finger to his lips and pointed to the woman below, alerting his companions to her presence. He didn't want an innocent bystander shot.

Chavez and Johnson proceeded to the hallway on the left, while Derek crouched on the landing. As he moved to join them, his goggles filled with unbearably bright blinding light. His eyes squeezed shut against the flash just as a shot boomed out and plaster erupted from the wall behind him. The woman downstairs screamed. A second shot exploded and Derek dove away, peeling off his goggles. He rolled on to his stomach and aimed his gun toward the shots.

At the bottom of the stairs, a guard held a revolver in one hand and a large electric lantern in the other. The shaft of light from the device filled the upper landing, throwing shadows on the wall behind Derek. The guard lined up for another shot, but Derek returned fire. His silenced rifle bucked slightly in his hands one time. The guard slumped to the tiles with a bullet through his heart. The light's beam fell with him, pooling on the floor around him, returning Derek's position to relative darkness. The woman below stood still, horror filling her eyes, mouth slightly opened. She glanced at the fallen man, then at Derek, and ran away, another scream exploding from her lungs.

Derek's eyes moved from the retreating woman to the dead man on the floor. His death was unfortunate, but there hadn't been another option.

Drawn by the sounds of the firefight, Johnson crouched in the entry. Derek signaled all was clear and vaulted the remaining steps to join him.

The three men re-grouped and discovered the entrance of the master suite where their quarry was presumed to be residing.

They found themselves in a long passage with plush carpeting, more paintings, and lined with doors one either side, some of them open. At the end was the set of double doors—their destination.

Johnson moved ahead with Chavez following. As they came to an open door, they pressed their backs against the wall. Johnson readied his weapon in front of him and swung away from the wall, aiming the barrel through the dark portal to cover its interior. Satisfied, they continued thus, each man alternately repeating the process until they reached the end of the hall.

Derek brought up the rear and joined them in front of the large double doors. He nodded, and Chavez tried the lock, but it didn't turn. Silence no longer necessary, Derek smashed the door with his foot. The wood around the lock shattered, and the three men stormed into the room, brandishing their weapons.

Along the left wall of the huge room was an equally large bed. In its middle, with the sheets pulled up around his neck, sat their wide-eyed objective.

Chavez ripped the sheets back and pulled al-Douri to his feet. To his credit, he didn't resist, beg, or bargain. He seemed resigned to his fate, as if he had known it was only a matter of time until he was found. Chavez bound the man's hands and a tied a gag over his mouth.

* * * * *

After incapacitating their assigned guards, the rest of Derek's men were able to escape the mansion without resistance. At their rendezvous point in a clearing in front of the compound, the twelve-man team gathered around Derek. He issued terse commands: "Johnson, take the rear. Pearson, you take point. Let's hoof it to the LZ and get this package home!" He hesitated a moment. Something didn't seem right. He could almost sense eyes upon him. Alarm bells clanged in his head. His nerves were raw; the mission was not yet complete.

The wind picked up, not cooling, just stirring the tepid air. The clouds parted to reveal a moon so large and brilliant it lit the clearing like day compared to the thick darkness. The moon's light bathed the entire valley. Derek peered at the thickly vegetated hills surrounding the compound. He felt exposed, naked. The sense of being watched made

his skin tingle. He had relied on his instincts to live this long, and he would not ignore them now. “Move it to the trees now! Double-time.” He and his men dashed toward the tree line, half dragging, half carrying their prisoner with them.

“Ahh!”

Derek turned as al-Douri cried out. His men reacted quickly, making an outward-facing circle, guns at the ready. Corporal Chavez sprinted to al-Douri’s side and applied pressure to the entrance wound in the man’s back and the exit wound at the front. His efforts did little to staunch the flow of blood. He met Derek’s gaze and shook his head.

Derek knelt at al-Douri’s side. The man’s breathing become shallow, his skin pale. He was not going to make it out alive. “Who did this to you, and why?” Derek didn’t expect an answer.

Al-Douri stared at him, lucidity returning to his liquid brown eyes. With fading strength, he grabbed Derek by his lapel and pulled him down. He whispered, “The Hawk. Look for the Hawk. He did this to me. He has the weapons. He is going to . . .” The man’s voice trailed off as his body failed.

Derek said to his men, “Did anyone see where the shot came from?”

“It came from up the slope in the trees, that way.” Two of his men pointed in the same general direction.

Derek weighed his options and decided against taking his team to pursue the shooter. They had to get out. He pulled a blanket from his pack and draped it over the corpse. He said a silent prayer for the man’s soul. Nothing else could be done. “Wagner. Chavez. Grab him.” He stood and scanned the horizon while his men formed a makeshift stretcher out of the blanket. “All right, let’s move out. Keep your eyes open.”

* * * * *

Amman Jordan: 10:15 a.m.- Eastern European Time

Hussaam towed the sweat from his forehead and switched off the treadmill. He sipped from a bottle of water and admired the scenery. The training room’s window afforded him a view of the pool and the mountainous countryside surrounding his estate. The brilliant morning sunshine glistened off ripples on the pool’s surface, and small puffs of cumulous lazily floated in the azure sky.

He exercised twice a day: a light work-out in the morning and an intense one in the evening. His bodyguards, Basil and Rashad, were required to join him. One of Hussaam's phones rang. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a source of agitation for him. His morning exercise period was not to be disturbed. But he hoped this was the one call he anxiously awaited. Basil brought the ringing phone to him. The satellite phone, good. This could only be one man. A deadly and useful man whose services Hussaam had utilized many times. He placed the phone to his ear.

"The target has been neutralized."

"Did they have a chance to question him?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I witnessed the whole operation."

"Well done."

Without further comment, the call was disconnected from the other end.

Hussaam tossed the phone back to Basil. Al-Douri was dead. It was going to be a good day. He rubbed his hands together. Now, what had the cook prepared for brunch?

CHAPTER II

THE ancient city lies in ruin, not the victim of time and decay but ravaged by fire and violence. The buildings, what little of them remains, are crafted of large hand-hewn stone-and-clay bricks and stout bracing timbers. The devastation, whatever the cause, is complete. Overturned stones litter the ground, and the bracing timbers are nothing but charred remains. The city still burns. Bright red-orange flames radiate heat that even from a distance feel as if they are baking his face, drying him out, and making his skin feel taut as old leather. The fire's light casts the entire scene in a red hue. Bodies are everywhere, lying over each other, in doorways, on the streets. Their clothing is in tatters, their skin smolders. It is a scene of doom, of chaos, of death.

In the midst of the devastation a man kneels, his body wracked by sobs of grief. A large book is open before him. He is out of place in this ancient, gruesome, scene. His clothes are modern and well kept. His hair is short, his shoulders broad. He turns his head, revealing an intense gaze. "Save us." The words are spoken in a whisper yet seem to reverberate and echo.

He lifts the book, and its pages become visible. It is a Bible, old and worn, its edges slightly frayed. He points to words on the left side of the page. Without perceptible movement, he is suddenly close. A few feet separate them. His intent green eyes appear troubled and haunted, enhanced by the glimmering firelight. He speaks again. "The answer is in Nahum . . ."

Aaron's eyes popped open and he bolted upright, the swift motion shaking the bed. Sweat poured down his forehead, down his back. His skin was cold and clammy. His heart raced. Blood throbbed against his temples, and he couldn't seem to catch his breath. For a moment he

didn't know where he was, disoriented by sleep-clouded eyes, until details of the room coalesced. The shadow of a pine dresser and armoire, the humming of a ceiling fan, the scent of laundered sheets. His bedroom.

A groan beside him told him he had woken his wife.

Sarah rolled over and propped on an elbow. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"It was a dream. *The* dream. Again." His voice was quiet, words spoken in a whisper, as if speaking louder would provoke the demons haunting his sleep.

Sarah stroked his arm. The touch was tender and it still made his heart leap. She studied his face. "Try to relax. It was just a dream." There was worry in her eyes. "You fell asleep with the news on again."

It was true: news of tensions in the Middle East, terrorist bombings, terror threats, nuclear threats, continuing unrest in Iraq, and natural disasters dominated the headlines.

The problem was that deep down, in the depth of his being, Aaron sensed his were more than mere dreams, more than nightmares, and even worse than any of the terrifying images he could remember conjuring in sleep as a child. There was something in him, in a place he couldn't bear to explore, screaming to him that these were more than just nightmares, more than his subconscious identifying an unresolved issue in the waking world.

Sarah still stroked his arm, and Aaron covered the back of her hand with his palm. "I'm fine. Go back to sleep." He squeezed her hand for assurance.

Though she appeared unconvinced, she rolled over and settled into the sheets.

Save us.

Save who?

The answer is in Nahum.

Who, what, where was Nahum?

He wiped the perspiration from his brow and lay back on the pillow. Though he closed his eyes and forced his tense muscles to relax, sleep was a long time coming.

* * * * *

Aaron, normally an early riser, could tell by the glow through the curtains that it was much later than he preferred to get up. Even on Saturdays he usually woke long before his wife, affording him precious quiet time with his daughter. At nine months old, Abigail was his pride and joy.

“Time to get up,” he told himself, but his body just didn’t agree. With a groan, he forced himself upright and stepped out of bed. He heard the sounds of cooking, and as he drew closer to the kitchen he smelled his favorite breakfast: bacon and eggs. “Wow, sweetheart, it smells great. What’s the occasion?”

“What; there has to be an occasion for me to cook now?” She blinked her blue eyes and smiled.

Aaron gave her a quick kiss, poured a cup of coffee, and sipped it for a moment. He set the cup down and crossed his arms, his thoughts returning to the dream. Even by the light of day, he couldn’t shake its effects. It seemed so real; he had been there, experienced every detail. It was also very unusual. He dreamed every night but rarely remembered the details. As soon as he woke up, the memory usually disappeared like vapor.

His neck and shoulders tightened, and his back became stiff. He massaged them to ease the tension. Then he heard two precious words that could cheer any heart: “Da, da!” Abby screamed with delight when she saw him.

With teetering toddler steps, she ran to him with her arms outstretched. Aaron picked her up and her tiny arms squeezed his neck. His arms encircled her and clutched her tightly, inhaling her fresh baby scent, feeling her tiny heart beat against his chest. Holding her like this was when he felt the most like a man. Most of the time he saw himself as a little boy, trying to fill a man’s shoes. His arms were so strong and hard against her tiny soft body. This precious life was his to mold and protect. Careful not to scrape her face with his unshaved stubble, he planted a kiss on her cheek. His spirits lifted, he gave her a tickle to hear her giggle.

“I’ve had a tough time keeping her out of the bedroom. She just didn’t understand why you weren’t up,” Sarah said. “Now wash up. Breakfast is ready.”

The meal was delicious and just the way Aaron liked it: lots of eggs, lots of bacon. As usual, Abby spent more time looking at the birds out the window and dropping food on the floor than eating.

Aaron's sense of dread returned, draping him like a blanket, weighing him down. Unbidden, a question formed on his lips. "Do we still have the Bible Sis gave us?"

"Yes, I think so. Look in the study bookshelf." Sarah's eyebrows lowered in a quizzical manner, an indication of how strange she must have thought the question.

He walked into the study, steps heavy, pulse quickening. He located the Bible on a shelf. It was a gift from his sister, one of her many not-so-subtle hints to get him involved in religion. He held the book in his hands, gauging its weight. It was a large and heavy volume with scripture and study notes. It was the first time he had picked up a Bible in a very long time.

He started to open it but hesitated without knowing why.

A blast from a car horn nearly caused him to jump out of his skin. "Easy, calm down," he mumbled to himself. It was just someone picking up one of the neighborhood kids. *Get a grip. You're a grown man. It was just a dream.*

He scanned the cover of the Bible: the New International Version. It was supposed to be easier to read. Slowly, he opened the cover, its binding stiff from lack of use. After flipping a few pages he found a list of the books of the Bible. Using his finger as a guide, he scanned the page.

The skin at the back of his neck rippled with goose flesh. There, toward the end of the Old Testament list of books, was the word he hoped wasn't there but somehow knew would be. *Nahum.*

He stood absolutely still, staring at the word. Or was the word staring at him? The five letters leapt from the page, separating from the words around it. His fingers seemed weak and the book impossibly heavy. *How?* As far as he knew, he had never seen or heard of the book of Nahum. He had passing knowledge of the Bible from his youth but had not read it since. He wasn't even sure he believed it anymore.

He placed the open book on his desk and sank into his chair. What, if anything, could this mean?

CHAPTER III

STILL dressed in his robe and slippers, Aaron returned to the study. Sarah was in the shower, and Abby was down for her morning nap.

He sat at his computer, logged onto the Internet, and typed one word into his search engine: Nahum. As the computer finished its search, he let out a deep breath. Several web sites appeared. They all seemed to be religious or archeological in nature. He picked one at random.

As he read, the skin at the back of his neck tingled again. Apparently Nahum was one of the Bible's minor prophets. His book foretold the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The ruins of the once-thriving city of Nineveh were located in modern day Northern Iraq, near Mosul.

Toward the end of Saddam Hussein's regime, there had been a great effort to preserve the integrity of the ruins and completely excavate them. According to the article, Saddam's goal had been to preserve Iraq's rich cultural heritage. There seemed to have been a great deal of plundering during the years of U.N. sanctions.

Aaron realized as he read that his face was tight, eyes squinted and brow furrowed. He looked away from the screen and massaged his forehead. This was all very interesting, but how could he have possibly dreamt of this obscure book of the Bible which he could not recall having ever read?

He hadn't attended church since he was a teenager. He didn't miss it, either, especially the guilt. He could never measure up, so why even try? And so many of the people who went to church were phonies. Sunday morning they sang, nodded their heads in agreement with the preacher, said amen. Smiled and put a large offering envelope in the plate for all to see. On Monday they were cutthroat businessman. They would lie or cheat to make a profit, fire without compunction, and avoid their fami-

lies in the name of the dollar. Further souring Aaron were the televangelists with their coifed-up hair and shiny suits. They said things like “Geezus,” and “Gawwd,” or, “Place your hand on the Tee Vee and be heeled.” Healing, of course, had to be accompanied by check, money order, credit-card number, or deed to one’s house.

Gathering his courage, he picked up the Bible again. There had to be a simple explanation. He opened it, turned to the book of Nahum, and began to read.

The book was definitely not feel-good reading. It was about a terrible siege, the deaths of men, women, and children. According to the prophet, it was a result of their own wickedness. This was hard for Aaron to understand. Wasn’t God supposed to be kind and loving?

He decided to call his sister. The phone rang only once before she answered. “Rachel, it’s me,” Aaron said.

“Well, hey, sport. I was going to call you today. I haven’t talked to you in over a week.” In sister code that meant: I am a single girl all alone, and you haven’t even bothered to make sure I’m all right.

Aaron couldn’t help smiling. His sister was eternally optimistic and could find the positive side of any situation, yet make him feel guilty in an instant. “I’m *very* sorry,” he said.

“Well, there’s no reason for you to feel guilty, I’m fine. Really.”

Shaking his head, Aaron ignored the gibe. “Sis, I’ll tell you all about it later, but do you think your minister might be willing to talk with me?”

She didn’t say anything. After a second, when Aaron was about to repeat the question, she finally responded, “I’m sure he would. Do you mean you would like to start attending church?”

Aaron had shocked her. Good. “Slow down. I just need to get some advice.”

He deftly avoided her questions about what was going on and eventually was given her minister’s phone number.

* * * * *

Aaron decided to put off making the call until later. He stood and stretched, a groan escaping him. He rotated his neck and worked his shoulders. He was tight all over. Some exercise might be the remedy.

He changed into workout clothes and went into the garage, where he kept an exercise area. He would warm up by doing some Hyung, or forms, predetermined patterns of kicks and punches. His fascination

with the martial-arts began at an early age with movies and television. He begged for lessons as a child and though he'd never able to sway his parents into agreement, his interest didn't wane. He began lessons in college and never quit. An unexpected bonus had been the contacts and relationships he wouldn't otherwise have, including his friendship with Joseph.

After stretching for several minutes, Aaron executed a few impromptu kicks and punches to loosen up. He eased into position and began a black belt form called Koryo.

Block, kick, kick, strike, block, punch. He stopped, holding the last move, unable to recall the next one. With a shake of his head he started over, with the same result. He continued to lose his concentration after a few moves. He couldn't keep his focus. He glanced at the mixture of swords, sticks, and staffs mounted on the wall. The way his mind was wandering, there was no way he would even attempt to work with one of them. That would be a sure recipe for bruises and lacerations.

Instead of continuing, he turned to his heavy bag. He slipped on training gloves and began hitting the bag at random, alternating between hands and feet. After about fifteen minutes of mindless drumming, he stopped. His heart raced, his chest heaved, and perspiration dripped off him. Taking air in through his nose and blowing out through his mouth, he gained control of his breathing. He flexed tired muscles, now loose and relaxed. His anxiety was gone, almost as if the sweat had purged him of his sense of dread. Not the best workout, but it seemed to have done the trick.

* * * * *

After a quick shower, Aaron decided to call Pastor Jenkins. He doubted the wisdom of doing it, but it was worth a try. Rachel sang the man's praises, saying he was both young and wise, and acted like a regular guy. Aaron needed someone versed in scripture.

"This is Aaron Henderson," he said into the phone. "I'm Rachel's brother."

"Yes, Aaron, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Pastor." His grip tightened on the phone. "I just wondered if, well, um, I . . . this is going to sound crazy, but I'm having strange dreams. I really don't know why I called you but, I'm a bit confused and . . ."

“Wait, Aaron, why don’t you just slow down and start from the beginning?”

“All right. This is going to sound crazy, but here goes.” Aaron explained the recurring dream and its culmination last night with the man holding a Bible and the reference to the book of Nahum.

“You mean you’ve never read the book of Nahum?” Pastor Jenkins asked.

“No. Not that I can remember, anyway.”

“Well, that wouldn’t be too surprising. It is a somewhat obscure book, and I myself have rarely studied it.”

“Pastor, do you have any thoughts on what, if anything, it could mean? I hate to waste your time. It’s probably nothing. It’s just that the dreams are so real and vivid.”

“Is there anything going on that may be causing you stress? Work, financial strains . . . anything like that?”

“No, nothing I can think of.”

“Aaron, I’m no expert on dreams, but it seems to me there are two possibilities here. Either these are just nightmares caused by physiological or psychological events, or you’re actually having visions.”

Visions. Right. Next he would be building an ark or telling fortunes at the carnival. “What do you mean by ‘visions?’”

“Aaron, do you believe in God?”

“Yes. I think so. Maybe. Sometimes, to be honest, I’m not too sure. That’s one of the reasons I haven’t been to church in a long time.” *Here comes the sermon.* He almost hoped for it. That would make it easier to dismiss whatever else the man had to say.

“Well, in the Bible, God commonly sent dreams to reveal the future or give insight.”

Aaron took a moment to respond, surprised by the lack of rebuke. If there was anything he knew about clergy, it was that no opportunity to pile on the guilt would be wasted. “Pastor, I doubt that I am the type of person God would be sending messages to.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure. The Bible is full of unlikely and unwilling people who were used to accomplish great things. One of the most well known stories in the Bible is about Jonah and the Great Fish. The reason Jonah was in the fish in the first place was that he ran from God’s instruction. You’re not running from God, are you, Aaron?”

He began to doubt the wisdom of making this call. Maybe he needed to talk to someone trained in dream analysis.

“Hey, why don’t you come to church services in the morning? We can get together face-to-face afterward. I’ll think about this and maybe we can come up with an answer together. At the least it will make your sister happy to see you in church, and maybe you can get her off your back about it, for a few weeks anyway.” The pastor laughed.

“Well, that might not be such a bad idea. My wife would probably enjoy it.”

“Great, I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning. Church starts at ten-thirty. I’ll do my best to keep you awake.”

Aaron hung up the phone. He hadn’t received any answers, but his burden seemed lighter just discussing the dreams with someone else. It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from him. Maybe the man could help him. It wouldn’t hurt to find out.