

Chapter One

Danny Arens knelt and bent over the ancient tablet with curiosity, his face close to the ground atop Dragot, seemingly in the clouds just north of Masada and with a magnificent view of Dead Sea to the east. The writing on the tablet was ancient Aramaic, his specialty. He rubbed his hands on his khakis to dry the perspiration of anxiety, then picked the tools of his trade—a small whisk broom and a pocket magnifying loupe—off the ground.

Danny himself had discovered the tablet as the previous night settled in and had told his five-person team of volunteer archaeologists about it before sending them off for the weekend. All they knew was all he knew at the time, and he wanted this moment alone, to share it with the memory of his dead wife, who had so patiently supported him in his digs.

The hair on his neck rose in anticipation. But then, out of utter silence, he heard vehicles approaching up the nearly vertical, twisting road.

Tourists! he thought in consternation, since his team was all in Jerusalem or other parts unknown. This was the first writing they had uncovered in two weeks working the site, so he pushed aside the sound and bent to lightly dust off the tablet, then blew away microscopic powder.

He leaned in to read the markings, and the words “Oh, my” escaped from his lips. He read aloud: “For the director of music. To the tune of ‘The Doe of the Morning.’ A psalm of David.

“My G-d, My G-d, why have you forsaken me?”

Behind him the roar of engines became louder and closer.

“It *is* tourists—or partiers!” Danny said in exasperation. “That’s all I need.”

He turned to look and, driving over the hill came two beat-up black Volvo sedans, covered with dirt and probably unfit for such a treacherous journey back downhill. After all, this was a road with dead-man curves so frightening that its “Caution-Curve” signs contained exclamation marks!

Danny shook his head in disgust and pushed himself to a standing position. Slipping his brush in one back pocket and loupe in the other, he prepared himself to inform these people that a dig was in progress and off-limits except to his team and officials of the Israeli Department of Antiquities.

But instead of tourists pouring out of the cars, a half dozen men carrying rifles jumped out of the doors.

Fear soaring up his spine, Danny spun around. Before him, his archaeological dig was cordoned off in grids by strings of twine and vinyl flagging, each encompassing an area being meticulously “dug.” Some had barely scratched the surface; others were deeper.

Birds flying around the hill below him, combined with the steepness of the precipice, planted the idea he could use this spot to his advantage.

Gulping a breath, he leaped over the square before him, then over a foot-deep hole and sprinted toward the nearby fall to the south side of the hill. Gunfire erupted behind him and bullets spit up dirt in the air on both sides.

There were no trees at this height on this hill, no protection. He had run track through high school and college, but outrunning a bullet was another matter. A bullet whizzed by, close enough to hear, and he ducked and leaped forward, over the edge of the hill, tumbling down the steep slope. Head over heels he fell, any concern for being hurt overridden by fear of death by bullet.

The south side of this hill was out of sight of anyone anywhere. He was on his own. He faintly heard voices shrieking behind him, and guessed the leader was telling the others to spread out left and right and pursue him. “Kill the infidel,” were three Arabic words that sent terror-induced adrenaline into his veins.

Danny didn't resist the tumble, hoping in fact that it would carry him free of immediate danger. It felt like minutes, but probably was only ten or fifteen seconds, when finally he barreled into some low bushes.

Danny rose up on his haunches and pulled twigs out of his shirt around his neck. He shook his head and took stock of his body. It felt okay, no broken bones for sure. He stood and looked behind him. He

spotted three or four men halfway down the steep incline, probably forty yards away. Two of them saw him and raised their rifles to fire.

He lurched to his right, which would eventually connect him to the Dead Sea Highway—if he could get that far. Dragot was south of Qumran and halfway to Ein Gedi, so there was plenty of traffic along the roadway—if only he could get there before being killed.

When he took his second step, a pain shot up from his right ankle. *Oh, there's the injury, he thought. No way could I fall that far without one.*

A spray of bullets pelted the ground and bushes around him but, miraculously, he was not hit. He bent low to shrink their target and hurried as fast as he could, aiming for the treeline just fifty feet away.

More orders erupted on the hillside. “Hurry! Hurry!” Again the words were Arabic. “He’s heading toward the highway!”

“You three, head him off!” demanded the obvious commander of the group.

Danny scrambled further down the slope, hoping to disappear from their sight. Adrenaline filled his veins, helping to mask the pain.

“Dear God, protect me!” he said aloud. “Protect me from my enemies—whoever they are!”

Again, he flung himself forward, onto the ground, this time into a sideways roll, praying he wouldn't further damage his ankle.

Rocks cut into his arms and legs and brush impeded his speed, but he continued to roll. Finally, he smacked into the base of a wild date palm. He tried to muffle a screech from pain in his ribs, thinking that indeed now he had a broken rib as well as a sprained ankle.

He sat up and put a hand to his right ribcage. It was difficult to breath. Could a broken rib puncture a lung?

Danny grunted, grabbed hold of the tree and pulled himself to his feet.

There was an odd silence and for a moment he wondered if he had clambered far enough away to be safe for a moment. His answer came with two bullets, one ricocheting off the tree trunk and another planting itself no more than two inches from his nose.

He looked at the back end of the slug and spun around to the backside of the tree. More bullets pelted the tree and surroundings.

Getting his bearings, Danny guessed he was one mile, perhaps a mile and a half, from the Dead Sea Highway. He pulled his cell phone from a cargo pocket in his khakis. He was a bit startled to see that it hadn't been destroyed. But there was no tower signal.

He cursed his new enemies and speculated who they were. ISIS? Hamas? Hezbollah? Martyrs for Allah? And why? Was it the clue about the original music to the Psalms?

No, he determined. That could not be it. How would they know?

Danny thought of a 1,500-meter race against Ben Gurion University. He had run through pain that day and won by nearly two seconds. He could do it again. He was only thirty-seven and still ran three six-and-a-half-minute miles a day.

He grimaced, then, determined not to feel the pain in his ankle or ribs, took a deep breath, heard the starter's pistol in his head and raced eastward. Bullets followed him, splitting branches and kicking up dead leaves and dirt.

Trees and bushes became a blur to his eyesight. He scrambled over a knoll and then down another slope, staying in the tree-cover. Again there

was silence except for his breathing. The knoll had served as a barrier to the shooters. He glanced at his watch, figuring he could gauge the distance by the time he was running. This was good: he knew he had enough oxygen if his mind could work on equations.

But he called himself a petty name for wearing work boots. If only he were in running sneakers, he thought. He didn't have to wear work boots today. *Meshuggeneh! Crazy!*

Through the forest he ran, slapping aside branches of trees, using his arms as protection when running through brush. Once he stumbled on a rock, but caught his balance and rushed on. The ache in his chest, the throbbing in his ankle became dull memories. *Adrenaline. Gotta love it.*

Four-and-a-half minutes into the pursuit, with sweat sticking his shirt to his chest, he spun around a huge baobab tree and stumbled over a root partly above the ground. He broke his fall with his right arm and felt searing pain in his chest. Looking up from the ground, he scrutinized the tree, broad and naked at the bottom with a large cap of foliage at the top, and it occurred to him that it was the baobab he and a crewmate had noticed while driving along the Dead Sea Highway. It was unusually

big, its canopy probably spanning twenty yards. They had joked about contacting the *Guinness Book of World Records* and reporting discovery of the world's largest baobab tree. They'd call it The Silly Tree because they were in a strictly juvenile mood at the time.

He recalled the moment and then looked ahead. There it was. Route 90. The Dead Sea Highway! Only a hundred yards away.

He'd get to the road, stop a car, any car, and get away. He hadn't heard a gunshot for minutes. Those guys were trudging their way through the woods, weighted down by rifles, probably not an athlete among them.

Danny scrambled to his feet and headed for the highway. Suddenly he heard a single gunshot and a split second later felt the impact of lead in his leg below his knee and an excruciating pain. A second shot rang out and he felt a piercing pain in his right shoulder. It knocked him to the ground, writhing. He tried to stand but couldn't.

But I'm oh, so close! he thought, realizing the race was over and he had lost. But they had to drive to get ahead of me, he mused wryly. On

this spot he would die. Forget all his PhDs and famous digs; his legacy was incomplete.

Then the thought of his cell phone came to him. He pulled it out of his pocket. A three-tower signal. *Yes!*

He looked up and didn't see the shooter, but figured they were hurrying to him at this moment.

He didn't know how to call the IDF or police. His option: Dr. Katherine Cardova, his consultant to the dig and his friend who had named this The Silly Tree.

He punched the key and Katherine picked up on the first ring.

“Kat!” he said.

“Hi, Danny.” Her voice was soft, winsome. She sounded relaxed. Perhaps she was in Masada, just a few minutes away, or down at the Dead Sea spa—even closer!

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Tiberias.”

“Oh, no!” he cried.

“Why?” Her voice was suddenly anxious.

“Kat, I’ve been shot. They’re trying to kill me!”

“Who!?” Now it was alarmed.

“I don’t know. They speak Arabic, though. They came to the dig and started shooting.”

“Danny, where are you?”

“Remember the baobab tree? The Silly Tree? Right there.”

“I’ll call the police. I’m on my way.”

“You’ll never make it in time. Kat, wait. Late yesterday I discovered a tablet in the dig. There’s a unique symbol—”

“Yes?” Kat asked as his voice tailed off amidst the crackle of a lost connection.

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Having pulled his Land Rover into a parking space at the outdoor restaurant in Tiberias, Max Braxton stood for a moment, watching three Jesus Boats near shore on the Sea of Galilee. He remembered the last

time he was here, the memory almost causing the taste of the St. Peter's fish that awaited him.

Suddenly a beautiful redhead slammed open the restaurant door and rushed to the sedan parked next to him. Max watched as she opened the door and hurriedly turned the ignition. The starter spit out a whir, nothing else. Again. A faint sound like a metal whistle blown by a child. The lady put her head to the steering wheel and grabbed the wheel, her knuckles turning white. She was frantic.

Max tapped on the passenger window and asked, "May I help you, miss?"

Her face lifted and she turned to look at him, her green eyes glistening with tears. She pushed a button, the window rolled down and she leaned toward him.

"A friend of mine is in danger, being shot at by killers. I have to get there!"

The hairs on Max's neck bristled. "Pop the hood," he said and hustled to the front of the car as she did.

"Turn the ignition," he said.

She did. He looked and listened.

“I’m afraid it’s your starter.”

“Oh, no! Oh, God!” she said and tears that had welled around her eyes began to roll down her cheeks.

“Listen,” Max said, “I’ll take you. Where’s your friend?”

“At the bottom of Dragot, just off the highway. A ways north of Masada,” she said.

“Wow! That’s hours away. If he’s being shot at, we need to call the police. Hop in with me and I’ll take you there.”

The lady slid out of the car, opened the back door and pulled out a duffle bag, then pulled herself up abruptly. “With all due respect, sir,” she said over the roof of the sedan, “I can’t jump into a car with a stranger.”

“You can trust me,” he said. It was a statement.

“I don’t even know you.”

“My name’s Max Braxton,” he said.

“I’m Katherine Cardova—Kat. But I still don’t know you.”

“Let’s fix the trust issue first.” Max pulled a cell phone from a pocket on his cargo pants. “Will you trust me if I get us a police escort?”

She stammered as he scrolled through his contacts.

Max spoke into the phone, “Call Dudi Danino.”

“Who’s he?” Kat asked.

“Israel’s police commissioner.” Max pushed the SPEAKER button so Kat could hear the conversation.

“He’s an old friend. The Israeli police, or Mishteret Yisrael, handle crime, public security, traffic and—counter-terrorism. Dudi and I taught a hostage-rescue course together for his Yaman—that’s their Special Police Unit—and their MAGAV—that’s the combat arm, or Border Police.”

Kat began to speak at the same time Danino’s secretary answered the phone. Max held up a staying hand and said: “Martha, this is Max Braxton calling the commissioner. Tell him this is an extreme emergency—bullets in the air.”

“Certainly, colonel.”

A moment later Danino answered, “Max, what is it?”

“We need your men on the ground where a fellow’s being shot at off Highway 90 immediately south of Dragot. And, Dudi, I need a police escort from Tiberias down there.”

“Just a moment,” Danino said.

A few seconds later, he was back on the line. “My men will be at Dragot in ten minutes and Chief Inspector Moshe Halevi is at Hammat Tiberias, about six miles south of you. He’s one of my best officers, Max. He’ll give you an escort. What are you driving?”

“A white Land Rover with gear on the racks.”

“Hold on a moment while I tell Halevi what vehicle to look for.”

Max looked at Kat and motioned for her to get into the Rover. She hustled around to the other side of the Rover, tossed her gear into the back seat and jumped into the front just as he angled into the driver’s seat.

A few seconds later, Danino was back on the line. “You’re all set. But exactly what’s happening, Max?”

Screeching out of the parking lot, Max floored the accelerator and veered around a car whose driver decided to stop in the middle of the road for no apparent reason.

“I’ll let this young lady tell you, Dudi. I’m kind of busy.”

Max handed the cell phone to Kat and swerved to avoid yet another crazy Israeli driver who was pulling out of a side street in front of him.

“Actually most all of them are crazy,” he muttered to himself.