

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLACK ORDER*

# JAMES ROLLINS

A NOVEL



# THE JUDAS STRAIN



THE  
JUDAS  
STRAIN

A Σ SIGMA FORCE NOVEL

JAMES  
ROLLINS

 HarperCollins e-books

TO CAROLYN McCRAY  
*who read all my earliest scribblings  
and didn't laugh too much*

*The pestilence came first to the town of Kaffa on the Black Sea. There the mighty Mongolian Tartars waged siege upon the Italian Genoese, merchants and traders. Plague struck the Mongol armies with burning boils and bloody expulsions. Struck with great malice, the Mongol lords used their siege catapults to cast their diseased dead over the Genoese walls, and spread plague in a litter of bodies and ruin. In the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347, the Genoese fled under sail in twelve galleys back to Italy, to the port of Messina, bringing the Black Death to our shores.*

—DUKE M. GIOVANNI (1356), trans. by Reinhold Sebastian  
in *Il Apocalypse* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1924), 34–35

*Why the bubonic plague suddenly arose out of China's Gobi desert during the Middle Ages and slew a third of the world's population remains unknown. In fact, no one knows why so many plagues and influenzas of the last century—SARS, the Avian Flu—have arisen out of Asia. But what is known with fair certainty: the next great pandemic will arise again out of the East.*

—United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,  
*Compendium of Infectious Diseases*, May 2006



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## NOTE FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

HEREIN LIES A MYSTERY. In the year 1271, a young seventeen-year-old Venetian named Marco Polo left with his father and uncle on a voyage to the palaces of Kublai Khan in China. It was a journey that would last twenty-four years and bring forth stories of the exotic lands that lay to the east of the known world: wondrous tales of endless deserts and jade-rich rivers, of teeming cities and vast sailing fleets, of black stones that burned and money made of paper, of impossible beasts and bizarre plants, of cannibals and mystic shamans.

After serving seventeen years in the courts of Kublai Khan, Marco returned to Venice in 1295, where his story was recorded by a French romanticist named Rustichello, in a book titled in Old French *Le Divisament dou Monde* (or *The Description of the World*). The text swept Europe. Even Christopher Columbus carried a copy of Marco's book on his journey to the New World.

But there is one story of this journey that Marco refused to ever tell, referring only obliquely to it in his text. When Marco Polo had left China, Kublai Khan had granted the Venetian fourteen immense ships and six hundred men. But when Marco finally reached port after two years at sea, there remained but two ships and only eighteen men.

The fate of the other ships and men remain a mystery to this day. Was it shipwreck, storms, piracy? He never told. In fact, on his deathbed, when asked to elaborate or recant his story, Marco answered cryptically: "I have not told half of what I saw."