

BEIRUT, 2006

On a brilliant autumn Levantine morning, beneath a bleached, periwinkle sky dotted with fluffs of downy clouds, Nathan Monsarrat pushed through the revolving glass door into the dowager Beirut Orient Hotel thirty minutes early for his luncheon with Monsieur André Simenon. The seat he chose in the Byblos Lounge offered a clear line of vision into the lobby. He scanned the busy space for Lebanese gendarmerie as Saudi sheiks robed in black *bisht*, Jordanian princes wrapped in red-and-white tasseled *keffiyeh*, and Algerian Berbers cloaked in hooded, white burnoose like inscrutable *djinn* paraded across the patterned marble floor. Tunisian courtesans gowned in Parisian fashions and scented with the attar of roses swayed like bejeweled bracelets on the arms of Moroccan businessmen attired in bespoke Milanese suits, their hawk eyes sweeping the lobby for new conquests.

While the auspicious day and date, Friday the thirteenth of October, marked the sixteenth anniversary of the conclusion of the country's bloody civil war, the resuscitated heart of Beirut beat to the rhythm of a frenetic *dabka* dance. Traffic snarled on the seaside Corniche like tangled webs of Lebanese deceit. Beyond the shrapnel pocked seawall, patched fishing boats plied the azure waters of the eastern Mediterranean alongside sleek yachts of the wealthy. Precisely at noon, the shattering wail of the muezzin called the faithful to prayer.

Monsarrat had as much use for superstitions as he did for Simenon, an obstinate sixty-two-year-old French oil executive, but he followed his marching orders like a well-disciplined soldier. Not of the military command, though, but of the Langley variety. A Central Intelligence Agency, deep-cover operative valued for his linguistic skills, fast hands, faster brain, and photographic memory, Monsarrat adapted to his environment with the ease of a deadly chameleon. In Beirut, the

city of pashas and effendis, he wore the manners of the Lebanese powerful like a haughty skin.

With a limp wave of his hand, he beckoned an elderly waiter bearded with luxuriant muttonchops and ordered Arabic coffee. "*Qahwa arabiyya.*"

The old man wore a silk Ottoman kaftan and billowing *salvar* trousers threaded with silver filigree. Returning with a lidded pewter cup of cardamom spiced coffee, he bowed his head as he placed it onto the table, like a servant fallen from grace.

Monsarrat dismissed him with a single word of supercilious thanks. "*Merci.*"

Beneath his Beirut affectations, the deep-cover operative radiated a middle-America respectability. An inch over six feet, he carried two hundred pounds of hard muscle. His biceps, triceps, and deltoids were firm. His six-pack rippled. He possessed a thick mop of unruly, brown hair, and his brown eyes were crisp with energy. He wore a tailored, grey suit with chalk stripes, a white shirt of sea island cotton fastened with initialed cufflinks of twenty-four carat gold, a red and blue, silk regimental tie, silk socks, and black loafers. Beneath his jacket a leather shoulder rig holstered a nine millimeter Beretta M9A1.

He had met Simenon twice previously. The first occasion, two months earlier, took place during a dinner at Hôtel Matignon in Paris, the official residence of the Prime Minister. The second meeting occurred three days prior at the concert of a Parisian mezzo soprano in the Salon de la Musique of Qasr es-Sanawbar, the French Embassy in Beirut. The dinner initiated the recruitment. The concert baited the trap. The luncheon would snare the Frenchman with an offer of fiscal salvation or sentence him to professional ruin.

Simenon suffered the expensive addiction of a matched pair of very young and very expensive Sidonian mistresses. Their youth and beauty allowed them to spend his money faster than he earned it, and their regular purchases of signature

creations from New York haute couture designers, hand-wrought, Venetian jewelry, and one-of-a-kind, Florentine, leather handbags made them extremely popular in Beirut's trendy boutiques, while the parties they hosted in his hotel penthouse endeared them to the city's insomnolent socialites.

Maintaining the lifestyle of his mistresses had buried Simenon in a deep hole of debt. Banks and creditors hounded him like wolves circling wounded prey.

Monsarrat's mission in Beirut, to buy the Frenchman's markers in exchange for intelligence on his company's plans to upgrade the capacities of Iraq's oil refineries in Basra, Nasiriyah, and Diwaniyah, adhered to the First Commandment of Langley, Bribery was Fleeting but Blackmail was Forever. His success would depend not upon the accursed luck of Friday the thirteenth but the oil executive's Gallic temperament.

In the lounge, a brace of Saudi sheikhs visaged like cragged granite smoked tobacco infused with the scent of orange groves from nacre hookahs. They murmured the fine print of verbal contracts sealed with the memories of spilled blood as their fourth wives preened into compact mirrors of stamped gold. Through tall windows beneath screens of thick wire, memorials to the internecine war, shafts of sunlight painted crowns of checkered gold atop coils of blue smoke. Soft chords of oud and *darabukka* music wafted from recessed ceiling speakers.

Monsarrat sat in the lounge cloaked with the serenity of a roshi. He enjoyed the stillness of waiting. By equal parts temperament and training, he embraced patience in a manner that his boss at the Agency, the peripatetic Felix Sanhedrin, ten years his senior, five inches shorter, fifty pounds lighter, and five hundred percent more Machiavellian, had yet to master.

Monsarrat's secure Blackberry was a manic hector in need of Ritalin. It vibrated, chirped, and flashed simultaneously. He glanced at the encoded number,

pressed the green button, and spoke French, Lebanon's second language, Sanhedrin's familiarity in Arabic limited to menu items such as alcohol, coffee, and hummus. "*Oui, mon ami. Ça va?*"

Sanhedrin disdained social niceties. "Are you sitting with Simenon?"

"Not yet, Felix. Another few minutes, if he's on time."

Static ripped the transmission. "Repeat, Felix. You broke up."

Sanhedrin replied as if Monsarrat were to blame for the disruption. "I said to forget the Frenchman. The mission's scrubbed."

He signaled for the elderly waiter, handed him 10,000 Lebanese *lira*, and walked out of the lounge, the Blackberry pressed to his ear. "What happened? I've got the pitch ready. Either he comes across, or I squeeze his balls until they burst."

Six thousand miles to the west, Sanhedrin answered, "Simenon is history. You're reassigned to a new target."

He knew too well the finger-in-the-dike culture of the Agency. Neither protesting politely nor throwing a tantrum would back Sanhedrin off one of his mercurial decisions. "What do you need from me, Felix?"

A twenty-five-year veteran of Agency covert operations marked by thin lips, a skull as polished as a cue ball, and skin as pale as a negligée, Sanhedrin wore four-thousand-dollar suits, a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch, and a platinum ring capped with a baguette diamond worthy of a Hollywood starlet. He exuded arrogance like cheap aftershave. "You must understand the vital importance of your new mission, old buddy. You pull this off, garlands and medals will attend you upon your return to Langley. A veritable triumph at the gates! Not to mention a promotion and a raise."

Monsarrat entered the hotel lobby and stepped into the passageway between an Italian jewelry boutique and a Swiss furrier. He watched the lobby while he spoke. He did not want Simenon to surprise him. "Promises, Felix, always promises."

Sanhedrin suffered from dramatic flares. "Abdullah al-Hanoud arrived in Lebanon from Damascus early this morning and checked into the Ambassador Suite at the Beirut Orient Hotel. He likes to pamper himself with Michelin restaurants and Scandinavian escorts when he travels outside austere Syria."

The name meant nothing to Monsarrat. "Who's al-Hanoud?"

"Only the Palestinian Liberation Jihad's number two man after the big boss, Ramadan Khalid. The terrorist chief calls himself abu Iyad, the Father of Strength, but al-Hanoud took the name abu Nasr, the Father of Victory. Your assignment is to locate, kidnap, and exfiltrate abu Nasr to Larnaca. I'm sending you a photo."

Monsarrat knew the terrorist organization by its Arabic title, *Harakat al-Jihad al-Tahrir al-Filastini*, and he recognized the *kunya* of both its *Ra'is*, Ramadan Khalid, and his deputy, Abdullah al-Hanoud. Intelligence reports from Damascus and Baghdad claimed the Palestinian regularly crossed the porous border between Syria and Iraq bearing caches of sophisticated IEDs and EFPs for use against American targets in the Western Desert of al-Anbar. "Sure, Felix, not a problem. You want me to walk into Baabda Palace and kidnap the president of Lebanon, too?"

"Listen carefully, old buddy. Aside from his childhood friend from the Balata refugee camp, Hani as-Sayyad, better known as abu Ubaid, your new best friend is the most dangerous terrorist bomb maker since the Israelis killed the engineer in Beit Lahiya. Abu Nasr is responsible for dozens of ambushes against our military in Iraq and high-profile attacks on our diplomatic missions in Europe and the Middle East. I want him in a three by five cell wearing Gitmo orange."

During his career with the Agency, Monsarrat's paranoia had provided him with pellucid moments of clarity. It had also kept him alive. In the Beirut Orient Hotel, he welcomed its arrival like the return of a trusted friend. "Locating abu Nasr may be easy, Felix, but kidnaping and exfiltrating him to Larnaca will be damn difficult."

Sanhedrin treated the accusation like an accolade. "It'll be a dinner cruise on the Med, only without the orchestra and ballroom dancing. I've arranged for a very competent skipper to speed you from the Port of Beirut to the Cypriot harbor in a fast rigid hull with dual outboards."

Where his boss saw rolling, green hills, Monsarrat discovered booby-trapped meadows strewn with fragmentation mines. "You're the Agency's oil poobah. Why are you involved with Palestinian terrorists?"

Sanhedrin's explanations ranged from the glib to the circuitous. "I convinced the Mandarins that I need to read the Middle East EXDIS if they want me to do my job right. Middle East and oil go together like soup and sandwiches."

"You read the close-hold cable traffic from the entire region?"

"Monday through Friday plus weekends. Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Baghdad, Jerusalem, betwixt and between, plus the babblings of the intelligence community's seventeen ugly sisters," Sanhedrin confirmed. "Chief of Station Damascus filed a report that a high-value target named abu Nasr traveled overland to Beirut beneath the cloak of Levantine darkness, a night journey like Mohammed's, but with a Range Rover instead of al-Buraq the flying horse. He arrived with his entourage in time to order breakfast from room service. No further action requested. Chief of Station Beirut agreed to the stand-down with alacrity."

Monsarrat wanted to ask Sanhedrin how he found the time to tackle his global oil responsibilities, but knew that challenging his boss would be a waste of time.

Still, he asked questions to thwart the unwanted directive, like an outmatched boxer flailing on the ropes. “Why did they give him a pass if he’s such a bad guy?”

Sanhedrin enjoyed showing off his knowledge. If he had been a larger man, he would have flexed his muscles. “Abu Nasr is a Palestinian, and Chief of Station Damascus subscribes to the Syrian disdain for what Damascus calls its refugee problem. He concentrates his resources on compromising the Alawite regime. The squabbling Palestinian factions sit at the bottom of his to-do list, coverage only if assets are available, and there are never enough assets.”

Monsarrat’s eyes swept the lobby. The Frenchman had yet to arrive. He decided to risk angering Sanhedrin. “Why do you want abu Nasr so badly, Felix? Simenon’s meat and potatoes for us.”

His boss fielded questions as slickly as a hall of fame shortstop scooped zingers. “I see the big picture, which is why I’ll be director when the clowns from Damascus and Beirut are sharpening pencils in the Public Affairs Office. Stay with me, and you’ll go far in the Agency.”

Monsarrat preferred scornful Sanhedrin over felicitous Felix. “You’re screwing our mandate for the greater good of the Agency?”

“You say it like I’m betraying my holy vows,” Sanhedrin protested, “but I’m dropping a horny Frenchman to snatch one of the most dangerous terrorists in the entire Middle East.”

Monsarrat peered into the lobby. Even for a Parisian, Simenon was pushing the boundaries of arriving politely late. He held the Blackberry close to his mouth. “Why don’t you keep me on the Frenchman and press Chief of Station Beirut to

snatch abu Nasr? He has enough assets to kidnap every parliamentarian in the *Majlis an-Nuwwab*.”

Sanhedrin’s answer dripped contempt. “The tendrils of inertia run deep through the Agency, old buddy. Chief of Station Beirut will not shift assets to cover a Damascene problem. Privately, he agrees with his brother chief that the solutions to the Palestinian problem are named Sabra, Shatila, and Yarmouk.”

Monsarrat saw his head on the chopping block of Sanhedrin’s ambition. “They’re practicing the philosophy of the three wise monkeys?”

“Sixty-six percent. See no evil and hear no evil, but between them they spout enough depravity to fertilize a forest of Palestinian terrorists.”

Monsarrat allowed his disdain to stain his reply. “Fortune is smiling upon you, Felix. You have an opportunity to show the Mandarins your mastery of initiative at the expense of Damascus and Beirut, without risking a hair on your bald head.”

Sanhedrin’s sensitivities shone brightly. “Nor on your curly mop, old buddy. My plan is brilliant. It’s fireproof.”

“Why do you care about a Palestinian terrorist?”

“What choice do I have but to act independently? I lack the clout to order Chief of Station Beirut to blow his nose, no less to reallocate his assets,” Sanhedrin proclaimed. “To arrange five minutes face time with the Mandarins would take a week, and convincing them to override the objections of two chiefs would require a major miracle. For my good intentions, I would be given a new title and job description, Director General of the Augean Stables in charge of shoveling the Agency’s shit until I reach mandatory retirement age.”

“Let him go, Felix. We need Simenon.”

Six thousand miles distance provided Sanhedrin a sweeping generosity. “Not gonna happen, old buddy. Someone has to do the right thing. Someone like me and

you. We may be the only operatives in the entire Agency with a moral compass and a beating pulse.”

“I’m the operative, Felix. I’m the one hip deep in Augean shit,” Monsarrat hissed. “You’re the bureaucrat sitting safely in Virginia.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“What’s your plan for that, Felix? You gonna bring me a doggy bag from your next lunch at a fancy Georgetown restaurant?”

“I’m doing my patriotic duty, old buddy.”

Monsarrat’s paranoia blossomed. He anticipated the movements on Sanhedrin’s chessboard as clearly as if he were reading the history of Fischer versus Spassky. “You didn’t stumble upon this intel. You’re keeping tabs on abu Nasr and his brother Palestinian terrorists. Everyone else at Langley treats them like lepers, but you’re using them to expand your empire.”

Sanhedrin stepped into his official persona. “It’s a direct order, Nathan. Drop Simenon for abu Nasr.”

Monsarrat ignored him. “You knew two months ago abu Nasr would visit Beirut, so you jerryrigged a Frenchman with cash issues and sent me first to Paris and now to Beirut on bullshit assignments. You’ve wanted to snatch abu Nasr all along, so the Mandarins will give you a corner office with a bigger desk.”

Sanhedrin’s protest balanced sorrow with reticence. “You give me too much credit, old buddy. I only wish I possessed such prescience.”

“When this operation crashes and burns, who’s going to take the blame? Not you, Felix. You’re Teflon in Langley. I’m boots on the ground in Beirut. I’ll catch the splatter.”

“Crash and burn is slightly aggressive language, Nathan,” Sanhedrin advised.

“If I file a complaint with the OIG,” Monsarrat continued, “my career will fizzle like a wet bottle rocket. The Office of the Inspector General is a nest of vipers, and whistleblowers in Langley are short lived.”

“You’re becoming a tad dramatic, Nathan.”

Monsarrat called his bluff. “I’ll drop Simenon, but I’m not going after abu Nasr. I’m on the next flight to Dulles.”

Sanhedrin foiled him neatly. “You don’t want to disobey my direct order, old buddy. Remember the Augean Stables.”

Returning to Langley, Monsarrat silently agreed, would end badly for him, but he would still possess his wits and limbs. On the other hand, to remain in the good graces of Sanhedrin, he would face an extremely dangerous terrorist in a hostile city with neither support nor a plan.

He continued to stall for time, hoping that Simenon might carry an unbidden miracle with him. “You’re calling an audible for the good of the team? Punt the intel on Iraqi oil intentions? No consideration of personal gain? No Felix glory?”

Disappointment tinged Sanhedrin’s reply. “You’re acting obtuse, old buddy.”

“I’m acting in self-preservation, Felix.”

“If you say so, Nathan,” Sanhedrin agreed. He slid again into his official persona. “You remember the curriculum vitae of the Jihad?”

Short of scuttling the new assignment, a brazen act of insubordination the bureaucratic equivalent of treason, Monsarrat knew his choices were limited to following Sanhedrin’s orders in poor grace or with a modicum of enthusiasm. He chose the first option. “Pretend that I don’t, Felix. Pray enlighten me.”

“If you say so,” Sanhedrin repeated. “Palestinian Liberation Jihad kicked Fatah in the ass and bit the Hamas hand that fed them. They broke the religious mode and work with both Sunni and Shia and all the bastard offshoots. They take money

from the Ayatollahs and the Muslim Brotherhood. They run errands for the Alawite regime in Syria. They're smaller than Hizballah and Hamas but far deadlier. Abu Nasr cut his fangs as a Jihad apprentice bomber in the Quds Front, recruited from the faculty of engineering at Nablus University in the West Bank. He blew his way up their organizational chart to become their number one explosives maven. He's a brilliant strategist with a graduate degree from the Pol Pot School of Human Resources. Any of this ring a bell with you, old buddy?"

"Vaguely," Monsarrat admitted, but he knew of both *al-Ikhwān*, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Quds Front.

"Know this fact, Nathan. I'm dropping the Frenchman for abu Nasr, because he, his best buddy abu Ubaid, and abu Iyad are our new worst nightmares."

From his vantage point between the jewelry boutique and the furrier, Monsarrat watched Simenon step out of an elevator into the lobby with two exquisite, young Sidonian women, one on each arm. At the entrance to the Byblos Lounge he kissed each in Continental fashion, as if he were a chaste uncle and not a paramour neither wise nor wealthy. The lobby, Monsarrat decided, was clear. The only protection the Frenchman carried was his Parisian snobbery. "While anyone can buy a horny Frenchman at any time."

Sanhedrin could steal Halloween candy from children and convince them they had contributed to the Jimmy Fund. "Garlands and medals, old buddy. Promotions and raises."

Monsarrat wanted to drop the Blackberry onto the marble tiles and crush its electronic ganglia beneath his black loafer but knew he had no choice but to follow the new orders. Still, he hurled himself against the bulwark of Sanhedrin's ego. "Simenon's arrived. I can still squeeze his balls. The Mandarins give out medals for intel on Iraqi oil intentions, too."

“Stick to the plan, old buddy.”

“Simenon is the plan.”

From his office in Langley, Sanhedrin sighed mightily. “The new plan, Nathan.”

Monsarrat acknowledged the inevitable, a familiar capitulation with his boss.

“Okay, Felix, I’ll snatch abu Nasr, because I’m a Boy Scout.”

“Not just a regulation Boy Scout, old buddy. An all-American Eagle Scout.”

“An all-American sap.”

Deceit was Sanhedrin’s bread and manipulation his butter. He used friends and enemies alike as rungs on the ladder of his own advancement, consequences to be damned and suffered by others. “You’re the stuff of Agency legend, old buddy. Wild Nathan Monsarrat. New officers will study your exploits at The Farm.”

“You can turn off the spigot, Felix. I said I’ll snatch abu Nasr.”

“You may become director before me, Nathan.”

Monsarrat bore multiple scars from the long knives Sanhedrin wielded like a twenty-first-century Joab. Between his shoulder blades. In the small of his back. Beneath his fifth rib. He knew from hard experience the dangers of accepting his plans at face value. “I don’t even know what abu Nasr looks like.”

“I’ll send a photograph to your cell phone.”

“I need seventy-two hours. Five days is better. I need intel. I need a strategy.”

Sanhedrin sympathized. “I wish I could agree, Nathan, I really do, but we don’t have the luxury of time. Besides, you already have a plan of attack.”

Monsarrat failed to stifle his sarcasm. “Please share, Felix.”

Sanhedrin’s magnanimity was brighter than a solar flare. “Walk into his room, introduce yourself, and drag him to Larnaca.”

“If the op is that simple, Felix, why don’t you come to Beirut and do it yourself?”

In his Langley office, Sanhedrin laughed. “Glory to the gladiator, old buddy. Just bring me abu Nasr with his head attached to his shoulders.”

Monsarrat enjoyed the end of a telephone call with Sanhedrin. The satisfying click in his ear stirred memories of songbirds chirping and woodpeckers drumming in the early spring sunshine of his Iowa childhood, but the coddled sensation dissipated like wisps of morning dew as he approached the concierge station in the lobby. The old man behind the desk wore the conceit of a pencil moustache like Captain Courtney in *Dawn Patrol*. Monsarrat shook his hand, and the concierge slid the two Benjamin Franklins into the pocket of his suit jacket.

“My very good friend checked into the hotel this morning from Damascus. The Ambassador Suite. I have a very expensive gift for him. From Scandinavia,” he said in fluent Levantine Arabic. He described a zaftig figure with his hands. “A blonde gift to make up for those lonely nights in Syria. I need a key card to his room. To surprise him.”

The ability to buy anything at any time from anyone at any price both blessed and cursed operations in Beirut. The concierge rubbed his nose with his thumb and two fingers. Monsarrat passed him an additional three hundred dollars. The old man wrote Ambassador Suite - Penthouse Floor in an arabesque script on the front of a hotel envelope, placed a key card inside, and sealed the flap. He passed it to Monsarrat with an unctuous wink.

“I have information for you, *habibi*,” he offered. He mimicked Monsarrat’s hand descriptions before rubbing his thumb across the four fingers of his right hand. “Your friend registered with eight companions. They are sharing the Admiral Suite,

down the hall from their master. If you desire more than one blonde gift, I will make the necessary arrangements.”

For failing to provide information on abu Nasr’s entourage, Monsarrat cursed Sanhedrin with silent imprecations, like a mute Zeus hurling frustrated bolts of lightening from his Hephaestuses throne. The foolproof plan brimmed with ingredients for disaster. A snatch job required time to plan, money to fund, and a team to execute, but he possessed none of those attributes. Faced with the challenge of eliminating eight bodyguards, even a deus ex machina would scurry back to Olympus.

For the terrorist, trust would be a concept as foreign as a bar mitzvah. Abu Nasr would keep his protectors close, half by his side, the other half eyeballing foot traffic in the hotel lobby. The lack of visible bodyguards worried Monsarrat, as did the fear that the concierge would call the Palestinian to collect an additional five hundred dollars as soon as the elevator doors closed behind him.

In the Middle East, so much went so wrong so fast and so often, a scorecard was needed to track the events. He stepped into the elevator and tasted the copper tang of dread. One floor below his target, he exited the car and walked quickly to the end of the hall. He pressed the crash bar on the stairwell door and ran up the concrete steps, two at a time, to the Penthouse Floor. No one stood in the hall. He pressed his ear against the entrance to the Ambassador Suite, listening for activity, but heard only silence.

He inserted the key card into the lock and pushed the door open. Two of abu Nasr’s bodyguards were propped against the vestibule wall. Each Palestinian had taken a brace of .45 caliber bullets to the heart and a *pièce de résistance* in the forehead. Crusts of dark blood edged the entry holes. At the far end of the suite, by

the juncture of the parlor and the bedroom, six additional corpses were stacked like a cord of damaged wood.

Next to his dead bodyguards, a thin man slumped unconscious, bound with duct tape at the wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of a wooden chair. The grey tape secured his torso to the splat and covered his head from the crown of his hair to the base of his throat. Slits allowed for breathing. Gurgled sounds erupted through the tape. His shirt and pants hung in shreds. Purple bruises puffed beneath the thick, black hair of his chest.

Monsarrat assessed the situation. He needed to remove the tape and compare the bound man to the photograph Sanhedrin had sent him but found himself between a Levantine rock and hard place, too dangerous to walk forward, too late to back out the door. The neatness of the hit indicated a disciplined team of assassins. Since the Palestinian was still alive, he assumed at least one killer remained in the Ambassador Suite. He hoped his unseen host preferred to ask questions before shooting.

Middle Eastern security services enjoyed their work. The Lebanese gendarmerie would have tossed abu Nasr's digits across the carpet before cracking his skull on the cement steps in their haste to drag him out of the hotel. The Libyan *mukhabarat* would have gutted him like a Mediterranean bonito. Only the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Israelis possessed the professionalism, although not always the desire, to extract intelligence without creating an abattoir. He did not want to entertain the possibility that he had interrupted the omnipresent Russians at play.

He chose the advantages of a moving target, tucked and rolled over his shoulder, planted his right knee against the carpet, pushed his left knee forward, pulled the Beretta from its rig, and gazed into the resolute end of a suppressed Glock 21. A young man held the heavy pistol in his right hand as if it were a stalk

of straw. Two inches shorter than Monsarrat, he bore the compact physique of a gymnast. His skin was dark, his muscles granite, and his long hair hung in a black plait. He wore blue jeans, white sneakers, and a grey, hooded sweatshirt. He might have been twenty or forty, American or Russian. Amusement shone in his brown eyes.

He spoke in the accented English of the Levant. “Welcome, my athletic friend. I am ben Chaggai. Ben is not my given name. It means ‘son of’ in Hebrew, the language of my country.”

Like a barking dog that would not bite, Monsarrat hoped a talking assassin would not fire his weapon. “Which country would that be, Mr. ben Chaggai?”

“Of course, Israel.”

His attention fixed on the Glock, he said, “That makes you the son of a minor prophet.”

“Woe unto those who belittle the *nevi'im*, my friend. The prophets are unforgiving.”

“A Mishnaic term. No disrespect to your namesake intended.”

For the first eighteen years of his life ben Chaggai had attended a yeshiva in the Cardo section of the Jewish Quarter and rarely left the Old City. The morning after the seminal birthday, he gazed into a brilliant Jerusalem sky and saw neither Eliyahu’s chariot of flame nor the whirlwind of Job but a pair of F-15I *Ra’am* jets trailing white contrails. He followed a shortcut through the shops of the teeming Muslim Quarter, passed the churches of the Christian Quarter, and climbed the narrow, winding stone steps to Jaffa Gate. On the wide, cobblestone plaza, he entered a police station and announced that he wanted to fight for Israel.

Shorn of his Hassidic beard and *pe’ot*, he served first in the Golani Brigade and later in the Givati Brigade. He spoke sparingly, but killed with an extraordinary

ferocity, as if he were attempting to dispatch his private demons along with his enemies. His skills brought him to the attention of *Sayeret Matkal*, but he served only eighteen months in the elite special operations command before Mossad recruited him into its *Caesarea* unit as a *kidon*, an assassin.

Posing as a Russian exchange student, ben Chaggai studied at Teheran University by day and killed Iranian scientists by night. His performance against the ayatollahs brought him to the attention of ben Yoel, who remembered the intensity of his own fear in Tehran and greatly valued the worth of those who operated against the ayatollahs. Once the former yeshiva student concluded his assignment in Teheran, ben Yoel recruited him for his *khuliya*.

“An educated man holding a Beretta M9A1 in his hand,” ben Chaggai noted. “Am I correct? You are an American?”

Monsarrat imitated his jackhammer speech. “You are correct.”

“An Israeli and an American have no reason to kill one another today.”

Monsarrat felt the comfortable weight of the Beretta. “It’s rare to see an Israeli in Beirut. Are you Mossad?”

“You would not be incorrect to say so. And you, *habibi*? Are you with the Agency?”

Monsarrat answered truthfully. “You killed the bodyguards?”

“With some help from a friend or two.”

“Nice work. Where is your friend or two now?”

Ben Chaggai’s teeth gleamed very brightly against his dark skin. “Close, *habibi*. Very close. May I ask your name?”

Monsarrat told him. “Do you have a given name, Mr. ben Chaggai?”

“Of course. I am Baruch. I am pleased to meet a fellow prophet, Nathan.”

The Israeli’s friends worried Monsarrat. “Is it abu Nasr beneath the duct tape?”

“The Palestinian Liberation Jihad number two terrorist,” he agreed.

Monsarrat’s right knee throbbed. “Since we’re getting along so well, Baruch, why don’t we holster our weapons, wake up the terrorist, and have a nice chat?”

Ben Chaggai gestured with the Glock. “It would be better for you to place your Beretta on the floor and slide it to me. Very gently. Like you are a virgin and I am your first lover.”

“I can’t do that, Baruch. Why don’t you slide your Glock across the floor to me?”

His smile was fierce. “We have for ourselves a Mexican stand-down?”

“Standoff. A Mexican standoff.”

“English is difficult,” ben Chaggai sighed. “My friends and I killed eight Palestinians today. I do not want to add you to that number.”

“I don’t see your friends, Baruch.”

Ben Chaggai’s grip on the Glock remained steady. “I am omnidextrous. You say so?”

“We say ambidextrous.”

“As long as you understand I can shoot you through the eye with my right hand or my left hand.”

“You are a modest killer, Baruch.”

Ben Chaggai removed a cell phone from the back pocket of his jeans and punched a speed-dial number. In Russian, he delivered a curt sentence, “*Mat’ khochet spat’*,” disconnected the call, and dropped the cell phone in his jeans.

Monsarrat promised himself a final settlement with Sanhedrin, if he survived Beirut. “Are you Russian? A *mokroye delo* thug?”

His black plait swung like a metronome. “I am not wet affairs, Nathan, but it is useful for us to speak languages other than Hebrew inside neighbor countries. Often Arabic, sometimes English, but mostly Russian. Arabs fear Russians.”

“What does it mean, mother wants to sleep?”

“It means,” he answered solemnly, “that I have no further need for abu Nasr.”

Ben Chaggai moved as smoothly as a flowing stream. The Glock’s suppressor hissed, and the terrorist convulsed as the bullet punched into his sternum. A bloom of crimson stained the matted hair of his chest.

He swung the suppressor toward Monsarrat. “It also means that my friends from housekeeping are on the way, and you should be gone when they arrive.”

Monsarrat wasn’t sure if he referred to the hotel’s maid service or his Mossad team. He felt as if he had been taught a lesson in a subject he hadn’t known he was studying.

“Hold the Beretta by the barrel, *habibi*. Hand it to me butt first. You say so in America?”

Monsarrat doubted he could move as quickly as ben Chaggai and, with abu Nasr dead, he saw no reason to argue with him. He turned the Beretta over in his hand and offered it, butt first, to the Israeli. “We say so.”

Ben Chaggai put the M9A1 into the pouch of his sweatshirt. “Excellent, Nathan. Now lace your fingers behind your head. Stand very slowly, and I will pat you for additional weapons.”

Monsarrat followed the instructions. “Careful of my stomach, Baruch. I’m ticklish.”

“It is a very nice suit, Nathan.”

He acknowledged the compliment with a dip of his chin. “What now, Baruch?”

“Walk to the door. Do not turn your head. If you look toward me, I will put a bullet into your skull. Tell me you understand.”

Monsarrat appreciated the Israeli’s professionalism. “I understand, Baruch.”

Ben Chaggai issued orders with military precision. "Open the door slowly with your left hand. Keep your right hand on your head. Step into the hallway. Lace your fingers again."

"I hope our next meeting will be more pleasant."

Ben Chaggai laughed. "You mean more advantageous to you?"

"Something along those lines," he admitted.

"Leave the city, Nathan," ben Chaggai warned. His voice carried no trace of jocularly. "If I see you again, I will be forced to kill you, and that would make me sad, my new friend."

"Think how I would feel, Baruch," Monsarrat replied.